Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-
SHORT STORY COLLECTION 2
TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-
SHORT STORY COLLECTION 2

In Snowy Earlham Village

"Why'd you all keep thish a shecret from me? Tha's *mean*. You all *shneaked* behind my back... shneaked? Yeah, you *shneaked*— eeheehee!"

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

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Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-
SHORT STORY COLLECTION

VOLUME 2

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

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NEW YORK

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Re:ZERO Short Story Collection Vol. 2
TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

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A LOVE SONG FOR E M T

1

It began one afternoon, during a moment of rest between Subaru's chores at the mansion.

"Subaru, can you take care of something for me?"

"Nngah?"

At the sudden sound of the bell-like voice in his ear, Subaru turned around with a cookie in his mouth. And standing at the door of the dining hall, calling Subaru, was a beautiful girl dressed in white. Her long silvery hair shone like the moon, her violet eyes sparkling like amethysts—she was a half-elf who possessed an inhuman beauty. Her name was Emilia.

"Oops, are you still working? I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Mm'nope, I'm on break. I don't think there's any national law saying you're supposed to work with cookies in your mouth."

Swallowing the rest of the cookie, Subaru smiled at the worried girl. As Emilia sighed in relief, Subaru noticed the unusual object in her arms and raised an eyebrow. It was still fresh in his memory, the musical instrument unique to this world—

"Ah, I see you have a lyulyre. I thought it was busy collecting dust in the storage closet."

Echoing Subaru's sentiment was a maid who was also taking her break in the dining hall. She had short blue hair and wore a revealing maid uniform—she was Subaru's coworker and head of staff at the mansion: Super-Maid Rem.

Rem was a master of all household tasks and handled just about every chore in the mansion—the cookies Subaru was eating were baked by her as well. Currently, she was enjoying a little tea break with Subaru.

"If Liliana forgot to take it with her, I guess that dust-covered

lyulyre is hers?" Subaru asked.

"Not even Liliana would forget such an important instrument…I hope," Emilia replied.

"That pause revealed a glimpse of your distrust for Liliana."

"Oh, Subaru, don't make a joke out of it. No, it was Roswaal—that incident with Liliana inspired him to take it out on a whim. He thought somebody could play me a tune to help me clear my mind in between my studies."

"And I was the first person he thought of? Wow, that's oddly considerate for Rozchi."

Subaru slowly took the lyulyre from Emilia and gave it a light strum. A gentle tone filled the room, and Subaru looked right at home with the instrument.

The lyulyre was a wooden instrument that resembled the guitars from Subaru's world. It was on the smaller side, but once you got the hang of it, it wasn't all that different.

"Subaru, you can play?" Rem's eyes widened as she watched Subaru comfortably handle the instrument.

"Yeah, it's easy. It's not much different from the six-string we had at home. Liliana also gave me a crash course, so if it's folk songs you want, I'm your guy."

Rem tilted her head. "Six strings?"

"Just another name for guitar. Just think of it as an instrument exclusive to my hometown."

As he answered Rem, Subaru thought back to the colorful girl who had trained hardcore with the instrument—Liliana. Up until only a day ago, the bard had been a guest at Roswaal Manor. As expected of someone who made a living off music, her singing and her strumming were sublime. It was so impressive that not only were the ladies of the mansion enamored, but Subaru had also become her secret fan.

But while her talent for music was genius-tier, her talent for basic human functions left much to be desired. Still, the mess she got herself wrapped up in was finally settled, and normalcy had returned to the mansion.

During the days that followed, Emilia's interest in and admiration for music did not wane. Every time she had a break, she came to Subaru begging for a tune—she was obsessed.

"So, Subaru, can you play any of the songs Liliana played?"

"I'd rather not—you'll just compare me to her. Also, playing is

one thing, but singing at the same time is next level. It doesn't help that my voice isn't amazing."

"But you *are* amazing, Subaru," Rem said. "Considering how useless your house-cleaning techniques are, I couldn't have possibly imagined your incredible talent for music!"

"Aww, shucks, you didn't have to—huh? Wait, something sounded a little off. Was that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Hm?"

Rem's hands were clasped together approvingly, and her face filled with bewilderment over Subaru's concern about her unintentional snark. It was an adorable sight, but it also confirmed that she had only spoken what she truly believed, which twisted the knife in Subaru's heart.

Still, two girls expected great music from him. He wanted to put his best foot forward.

"Okay then, the *Love Ballad of the Sword Devil*—is too hard for me, so let's go with a 70s folk medley."

"Aww."

"Hey, don't pout. This song is just as popular."

With a sheepish smirk at his disappointed audience, Subaru began to strum the strings of the lyulyre. Emilia and Rem sat on the sofa and clapped their hands slowly in time with the music.

"Acoustic guitars sound brighter, so please adjust that with your imagination." With that disclaimer, Subaru flipped through the sheet music in his memory and played the lyulyre.

During his endless after-school hours and endless days of boredom, Subaru Natsuki had despised the idea of being stuck in a rut and spent time learning all sorts of skills. Guitar was one of the things he picked up.

Little did he know that all those wasted hours would bring joy to two beautiful girls—life was full of surprises.

"_____"

Reflecting the events and trends of the time, many 70s folksongs were melancholy love songs. Even without the lyrics, the ephemeral mood was embedded in the music. As the two girls listened to Subaru play, their eyes filled with grief and loneliness. Their rapt expressions tantalized Subaru. Seeing their faces made his heart smolder with pain—

"Secret technique! Teeth-Guitar—*ARRRGH*!"

"Su-Subaru?! Oh no! How could you do something so foolish?!"

"Subaru?! Ah, how could you be so foolish?!"

"Not in stereo, please…owowowow—ow-ow-ow!"

In an attempt to liven up the somber performance, Subaru's teeth and gums were utterly savaged by the freshly tightened strings of the lyulyre.

His tooth-picking stunt was an ultra-difficult feat that only top guitarists could accomplish after extensive training. Naturally, this was too much for a third-rate guitarist like Subaru. It was a bloody disaster.

"Please, Subaru, calm down," Rem said. "Pain, pain, go away, come again some other day!"

"Nononono…no pain? Wow, it's actually gone! Ahh, man, that hurt. Thanks, Rem."

Rem had cupped Subaru's yowling face and cast a healing spell that emitted a faint blue light. Subaru was grateful to feel the pain fade away as the cuts on his gums closed.

Meanwhile, Emilia watched Subaru with her hands on her hips and an angry frown on her face. "Why did you do that? You *really* scared me. Promise you'll never do something stupid like that again."

"Sorry, my bad. It's just, I know it's technically my fault, but I didn't like my song choice. Don't blame '70s folk. Blame me for choosing a song that clashed with the mood."

If he was going to play a song, it might as well be something lighthearted that both girls would enjoy. Folk songs were only for your crush, to bring the two of you closer.

"I'll play that last song some other time. Be patient, Emilia-tan."

"Huh? I don't exactly see what I need to be patient for, but okay. So…is the performance over? Are those all the songs you know, Subaru?"

Subaru was relieved to see that, to his surprise, Emilia looked like she wanted to hear more. Song choice aside, Subaru had piqued Emilia's interest in his playing. And since Rem didn't have anything to add, she appeared to feel the same way as Emilia.

Their interest in Subaru's music—who would have gotten himself worked up regardless of any interest—made him eager to live up to their expectations.

"And yet, the only songs I practiced are 70s folk—the tragedy! Damn, why didn't I learn anything peppy or cool…"

As Subaru cursed his past self, Rem raised a hand and offered a suggestion. "Having trouble deciding, Subaru? Then why not select a tune from Lady Liliana's repertoire?" It was a great suggestion, and incredibly funny because of Rem's inability to hide her adorable ulterior motives.

Surprisingly, Rem was the one most moved by Liliana's songs. Deeply knowledgeable in the poetry and nursery rhymes of the other lands, she used a helpful suggestion to Subaru as a cover to ask for these songs.

And Subaru was just as enamored with each and every song of Liliana's. However—

"Sorry, but I'm not talented enough to learn music by ear, nor am I anywhere near as talented as Liliana. Aside from folk songs, I can only play easy stuff… *The Flea Waltz* is about as far as I go."

"Subaru, you shouldn't let fleas waltz into the house…"

"Please don't look so upset—I'm gonna feel bad! And I didn't bring any fleas in here. It's the name of a song! But if anybody does bring fleas in here, I'll give them an earful later!"

The legendary piano piece's unfortunate title had doomed it to a tragic end.

As Subaru apologized, Emilia replaced her accusing stare with a disappointed sigh. Then she clapped her hands and smiled, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. "All right, Subaru, if you play me one of Liliana's songs, I'll forgive you. And I promise I won't laugh

at you if you do a bad job, so no pressure. Okay?"

"Lady Emilia is quite right, Subaru. I don't care how hard it is, I don't care how horrible you are, I don't care how badly you fail—I promise I will not laugh at you, Subaru. So please, relax and fail. Don't worry. Your Rem will dry all your tears."

"I'm not gonna cry! Maybe *don't* worry over me if it's gonna be that excessive?!"

With the apparent fear of his imminent crying hanging over his head, a deflated Subaru realized there was no turning back now. The only way around it was learning the music by ear. Many of the songs Liliana played, she had taught him herself. There was no excuse not to at least try.

Even so, Subaru's musical training was a clumsy solo pursuit. It was the result of hours of staring contests with his father's guitar and sheet music and a show of defiance aimed at his father, who often listened through the door, smirking like an idiot.

"Seriously, promise you won't laugh if I suck. And I promise I won't cry."

Leaving those words as a shield, Subaru held the lyulyre in playing position again. Then, with a light tilt of his head, he shot Emilia a pretentious wink and said, "By the way, my lady…any requests?"

"Oh, I know the perfect song! You know, the one that goes—"

Elated that Subaru had agreed to play again, Emilia happily clapped her hands together. Then she closed her eyes, searched her memory for the tune, and began to sing—

"La…la…lalala…"

Emilia's bell-like voice sang a string of notes in a few short breaths. The alluring melody in her beautiful voice made Subaru stop breathing.

Emilia's voice always held a bewitching quality that captivated and shook Subaru's soul whenever he heard it. Subaru always assumed that his heart fluttered whenever she talked for personal reasons, but surely her bewitching charm extended to others besides him.

As the sound pierced his eardrums and entered his bloodstream, an unstoppable feeling surged up inside of him, making the very core of his being throb. Her voice was so breathtaking that he found it hard to continue standing in her presence.

"_____"

She had originally started singing to communicate what song she wanted Subaru to play, but once in the song's bind, Emilia could not stop. Neither Subaru nor Rem were willing to stop her, either. They simply stayed still, listening to her weaving a special sort of magic with her beautiful voice until it was over.

In time, the song came to an end, and Emilia took a deep breath.

"Ah."

It was then that Emilia realized she had been hypnotized—she had lost herself in the song. Her white cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and she looked over at Subaru and Rem in a slight panic.

"S-sorry. When I was singing, I started feeling *really* good for some reason…"

"Well…no worries, we could tell by watching you," Subaru said. "You…really love singing, don't you?"

"I'm not sure…I never really had music in my life before…but yeah. This must be love…"

Her hand to her mouth, Emilia nodded shyly. Under ordinary circumstances, Subaru would try to find some way to get Emilia to breathlessly whisper, "This must be love…" again, but this time, the thought did not cross his mind.

Rem tugging quietly on his sleeve might have had something to do with that.

"Um, Subaru…"

"I know."

Catching the emotion in her faint blue eyes and the eagerness to speak in her voice, Subaru nodded and gave a short reply of agreement. That was all it took to link their minds. It was an emotion that only those who had heard Emilia's singing could share.

Action… He needed to figure out what was the right thing to do here. That was the most powerful weapon Subaru had gained from his time living in this mansion. After being at the mercy of a chain of fate, Subaru had learned an important lesson. Your decisions and actions were the only ways you could change a cruel, uncaring world—and so Subaru, once again, rose to the challenge.

As a pink-cheeked Emilia smiled at him, Subaru squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and said, "So, um, Emilia-tan…I'm not sure how I should say this, but…"

“Hm? What is it?”

With her hands on her silvery locks, Emilia gave Subaru a curious look as he struggled to find the words. Her amethyst eyes, which were looking straight at Subaru, contained a trust that wasn’t quite the same as Rem’s. Her feelings strangled his heart, but he suppressed the emotion and bravely took the plunge.

“Emilia-tan…you can’t—”

“—What *was* that dreadful sound? Did a bird just die? You’re supposed to be on break, Barusu. What ridiculous prank are you playing now?”

The door opened mid-rant, the loud voice shattering Subaru’s bravery to pieces. The one who stepped into the room was a girl with pink hair and light red eyes. She was identical to Rem in every way aside from her hair and eye color and size of her bust—it was Ram.

And with a look of disgust around the room (that Subaru hoped he imagined), Ram looked the stunned trio over one by one. Then, after closing her eyes for five seconds and processing—

“Now, here’s something you don’t hear from me often,” Ram began. “Can we all forget what I just said?”

“Kudos for grasping the situation so fast—but you screwed it all up, Ram!”

As Ram burst in and shook the whole room with the blunt truth, Subaru immediately exploded.

2

Emilia, the girl with a voice like an angel—was freakishly tone-deaf.

Put in words, that’s all there was to it…but the shock was too intense for Subaru for the description to stop there. It was the greatest tragedy of his recent years.

A beautiful speaking voice, a hideous singing voice—and Subaru was not the only one traumatized by the revelation. Rem, too, was unable to hide her grief and depression over the blunt reality. It would seem that Emilia’s destructive singing powers were earth-shattering to Rem as well.

That Emilia’s bell-like, velvety voice would be so far removed from harmony—who could have possibly foreseen such a thing?

“O God…” Subaru cried, “what hath this innocent child done

that thou shouldst be so cruel…!"

"For goodness' sake, don't be so melodramatic!" Emilia cried. "Oh, I hate this! I'm so, so, so embarrassed…!"

Emilia, her longer-than-average ears red all the way to their tips, pushed her face onto the sofa. Emilia's singing had been so off-key that Ram had gone out of her way to complain about it. At first, Emilia was a little unclear on what Ram was talking about, but between Subaru's pathetic excuses and attempts to help her save face, Emilia, too, had fully grasped the situation now.

And the revelation had resulted in a pouting Emilia, crouched in the fetal position on the sofa.

"A-all of you made too big a fuss out of it! I mean, sure, I never had any opportunities to sing before, so I was never taught how… but it's a little hard to believe that my singing sounds *that* strange. Everyone just wants to make fun of me… It's just a big joke to you, isn't it? Well, I won't give you the satisfaction—I'm not that easily fooled."

Hugging her knees to her chest, Emilia rattled on without a breath. She was the spitting image of a small child throwing a tantrum, denying reality with every fiber of her being.

Subaru lowered himself to her eye level and spoke carefully and sincerely. "I get it. You don't want to believe it. You want to question it. But you're wrong, Emilia, because I have never once lied to…Well, to be honest, I've lied to you a lot, and I also teased you mercilessly because I love making you blush, but—"

"Really?! That's news to me! How long have you been teasing me, Subaru? Tell me!"

"Now's no time to discuss that! Don't try to change the subject!"

"Fine…but I still feel like I'm in the dark about something…"

When Subaru let it slip that he wasn't always perfectly honest with Emilia, she looked upset about never noticing. But Subaru spread his arms wide in earnest, eager to get back in her good graces.

"This time, I'm telling the truth—not even a hint of a lie. I swear it."

"Subaru…"

With a sincere voice, a solemn gaze, and heartfelt words, Subaru told her what he thought she needed to hear most.

"You…are a victim of God's mischief."

"Is it really that bad?!"

“Well, the truth is so *shitty*, even *I* can’t believe it! Why does my Emilia-tan have to be *tone-deaf*?! She has such a sweet and *beautiful* voice—but the way she sings, there’s no way in *hell* anybody can ever be happy! If anybody’s to blame, it’s *God*! Either that or her parents should’ve stepped in before it was too late!”

“Aggggh…”

While Subaru clenched his fists and made his emphatic proclamations, Emilia uttered a tired groan. Despite Subaru’s impassioned speech about her, Emilia still didn’t seem fully present for the conversation they were having. This was probably because she still didn’t believe she was tone-deaf.

She was completely oblivious to the truth because of a condition that was particularly difficult to correct: *sensory tone-deafness*. Unlike a simple lack of coordination with her vocal cords, Emilia’s problem would be nearly impossible to correct because she could not perceive what was wrong.

In other words, if she had any hope of defeating this formidable foe, Emilia would need the help of her family.

“Puck! *Ándele, ándele*!”

With a snap of his fingers, Subaru summoned Emilia’s family and the one responsible for this fiasco. Subaru had no authority to summon Puck, but Emilia did, and she went along with Subaru’s momentum and called into the sparkling green crystal hanging on her neck.

“You cry out, I fly out! With a meow-meow-meow-*meowwww*!”

Faint particles of light spilled out of the crystal, converging into the shape of a small cat spirit. Singing a nonsensical line as he popped into the air, Puck landed on Emilia’s left shoulder, grabbed his long tail, and began to groom it.

“What’s up? What’cha want? It’s my day off, y’know.”

“What’re you, a busy, busy businessman? Besides, I thought you could hear what happened outside your crystal.”

“Did you not hear me? It’s my day *off*. And I sleep like a log.”

“Dude, you spend your days off like a middle-aged dad…”

With work hours of nine to five, the cute little cat couldn’t help but sound like a tired old office drone. Day off aside, Subaru quickly explained to the spirit what had transpired thus far. After Subaru finished his story, Puck nodded in understanding and glanced at the side of Emilia’s face.

“Now I see. So that was Subaru’s side of the story, but—are you

really tone-deaf, Lia?"

"I'm *not*…at least, I don't think I am… Subaru's overreacting. That's what I think. I can definitely sing. I wasn't joking around, I swear," Emilia pouted.

Subaru fell to his knees, bit his lips, and hit the ground over and over. "Oh, if only you *were* just joking…if *only*…!"

Puck looked back and forth between the pair, then with a snort of his pink nose, he said, "Well, I'll have to hear you sing first. Take it away, Lia."

"Ugh…if you laugh at me, I'll hate you."

"But I'd never laugh at you. Even if everyone else in the world laughed at you, I would never."

"Well, that was wildly chivalrous." Muttering at Puck's unexpectedly impassioned answer, Emilia sighed and closed her eyes. Then she hummed to herself a little to get the timing before she started singing.

The only problem was that her rhythm was already off. Nevertheless, she began to sing. Having made it through her first song earlier, this time her voice stretched farther and sounded better. Seemingly aware of this herself, Emilia looked refreshed and cheerful when she finished her song.

"Well?" Emilia asked, her cheerful eyes brimming with confidence.

"All right, let me see…" Puck murmured as he washed his face. "You know, I was always confident that I had done a good job raising you, Lia. You grew up into the sweetest and smartest girl in the whole wide world, and I truly believe this with all my heart."

"Oh…really? Gee, I feel kind of funny hearing that…" Emilia giggled, shy from the sudden shower of praise. But a silent *however* was lingering at the end of Puck's sentence.

"Never before have I regretted my own shortsightedness more than I do right now…"

"—Huh?"

"I'm sorry, Lia. I failed you—you are the best girl in the whole world, but I'm not the best father. That is my one true regret."

Right after saying this, Puck lifelessly slid off Emilia's shoulder. As the spirit tumbled down, Subaru quickly reached out to catch him. And in the palm of Subaru's hand, Puck weakly looked up at him.

"Forgive me, Subaru… It's all my fault…"

“It’s okay! Say no more, Puck. Nobody…nobody is at fault here. I mean, just look at how remorseful you are! Our hearts are on the same page, buddy. Am I wrong?”

“Ha-ha…thank you. Your words alone are my salvation. Oh dear—I suddenly feel very sleepy.”

The light fading from his lustrous black eyes, Puck went limp. The outlines of his body faded, becoming particles of light and dissipating. Subaru frantically strained his voice to stop him.

“No! Don’t go, Puck! Puck!!!”

“Thank you…Tell my story…”

As Subaru mourned the spirit disappearing in the palm of his hand—

Emilia side-eyed the pair and screamed, “Oh, you two are the *worst*! Stupid Subaru, stupid Puck! Stupid! You’re both…*stupid*!”

Emilia promptly lost it at their teasing and dashed out of the dining hall.

Puck and Subaru exchanged glances. “Yeah, we went too far.”

Deeply regretting their little charade, they frantically chased after Emilia.

3

“There are three main types of tone-deafness. Inability to differentiate sounds, inability to make sounds, and inability to stay on beat. If you crush each of these problems one by one, even the worst tone-deafness can theoretically be cured. In other words, Emilia-tan can be fixed!”

“Th-that’s a-*meow*-zing!”

As Subaru raised his fist and lectured, Puck gave the expected cliché response. The spiel Subaru had just given was actually a sales pitch he had seen once on a TV infomercial. The veracity of the claims was dubious, but it was at least a step up from trying to help her without a plan.

Pitch, vocal cords, rhythm—those were the three main sources of bad singing, so by necessity, that was where the cure lay.

“First, let me break down Emilia-tan’s problem so it’s easier to understand. From what I’ve heard, my best guess is the two main causes of her tone-deafness are pitch and rhythm. Her vocal cords shouldn’t be a problem because she was able to make sounds perfectly fine—also, she’s got a pretty face.”

“Subaru, Subaru, *tangent*.”

“Oops, my bad—not that it’s bad to say that she’s got a pretty face—anyway, she can make sound without any issues. So she only has two problems to overcome: pitch and rhythm. Now repeat after me!”

“Pitch and rhythm!”

Puck added his voice to Subaru’s. They were both eager to cure Emilia’s tone-deafness. Meanwhile, beside them—

“Hummmph.”

Emilia sulked on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest. She was not even slightly motivated. Catching Emilia and bringing her back was one thing, but her sulking was no joke. Still, the telltale twitching of her ears showed she was listening to their conversation, which was adorable.

“Since Emilia-tan was able to appreciate Liliana’s music, that proves her ears can tell the difference between good and bad sounds. Since she can hear others’ singing okay but can’t hear her own, that probably means she’s unconsciously correcting her own mistakes in her head as she sings. Let’s fix that first.”

“Easy for you to say, but how are we supposed to do that?” Puck asked.

“The most basic way is to have her listen to a properly performed song hundreds of times or have her hum along until she can match the pitch… It’s surprisingly easy to become self-aware if you try. Which brings us to step one…”

Subaru was ready to plunge into Emilia’s treatment plan. But right before he could pull out his secret weapon—

“Just when I thought things were getting quiet, why did you all have to start carrying on with selfish abandon, I wonder?”

A terribly grouchy voice cut in, and Subaru wearily shook his head. Then he turned to face the shameless wet blanket and let out a sigh in her smug little face.

“Dammit…we’re trying to stay positive here; don’t be a downer. You should read fewer books and read more rooms. Like this one—*read the room*.”

“For some reason, that line is uniquely vexing coming from you. I don’t even suppose I understand the meaning of this. *Why* are you doing whatever it is you’re doing in my Archive of Forbidden Books?”

Closing a book with a loud crack, the girl sitting on a stepladder

far back in the room stuck out her tongue. With a frilly dress and her hair in sausage curls, the immaculately dressed girl resembled a porcelain doll. She was the librarian and resident of the mansion—Beatrice.

And she and Subaru were like cats and dogs—Subaru wanted to be friends, but since she was such an easy target, he usually ended up antagonizing her. He just couldn't help himself.

"Well, what're we supposed to do? This mansion doesn't have any soundproof rooms. If we did this in some other spot in the mansion, Emilia's voice would leak through the door or windows. And then what? If word gets out that Emilia's tone-deaf, she can kiss the royal selection good-bye."

"Is my singing really *that* bad?!"

The threat of losing the royal selection was too much for her, and Emilia could no longer stay unresponsive.

Beatrice turned an icy gaze on Emilia and said, "I couldn't care less about what becomes of this girl's future. Besides, I don't suppose that serves as an explanation for why you all are making such a racket in my library."

"Beako, surely *you* understand? Normal rooms aren't soundproof. But we don't have to worry about that in the Archive of Forbidden Books. This room is on a different plane of existence. So no matter how loud the singing lessons get, nobody's inconvenienced!"

"And I'm *telling* you, I have never been more inconvenienced in my life!" Beatrice yelled, grabbing the hem of her skirt and jumping off the stepladder.

Her anger was justified, and her argument was sound. But it was an undeniable fact that Emilia needed the Archive of Forbidden Books for her singing lessons. So it was then that Subaru pulled out his anti-Beatrice trump card.

"Betty…are we really bothering you that badly? Do you…really want us to leave?" Puck implored Beatrice, his round, coy eyes wet with tears, his long tail limp in his paws. Even though Subaru had not briefed him on the plan beforehand, the devious kitty's begging was executed perfectly.

Beatrice instantly lost all her momentum and looked nervous. "B-Brother, you did nothing wrong, I suppose! But my Archive…"

"I know, Betty. I know just how much you cherish this room. But we need your help. I mean it. So please…won't you help me?"

“Brother…”

When the spirit she worshipped as a brother pleaded with her so earnestly, Beatrice’s heart quickly faltered. At the end of the day, she was never able to refuse a request from him. Victory was in sight.

“I win,” Subaru murmured, grinning wickedly.

Oblivious to Subaru, Beatrice gave a canned response. “W-well, I have no choice, I suppose. Very well. I cannot say no to my brother.” And with that, she was worn down until she gave in. So easily that Subaru worried that someday, some bad man would take advantage of her.

But now all the pieces were in place. Subaru and Puck nodded at each other, and Puck launched his entire body against Subaru’s open palm in a dramatic high-five.

And thus, with the Archive master’s permission obtained, Emilia’s musical training began—

“We have a long, hard road ahead of us. But let’s stay positive and push through it!” Subaru said.

“Rah! Rah! Rah!” Puck cheered.

“But I never said I wanted to fix my tone-deaf—uh, what I meant to say is, my singing may be a little off, but I never once asked you to fix it…”

Though each of the trio had their own agenda, their passion for the project threatened to leave the afflicted party out in the cold.

4

“All right, I’d like to start the actual lessons now…Emilia-tan, are you gonna keep sulking forever? This matter is *crazy* important, y’know?”

“Oh, come on. I don’t think a little crummy singing qualifies as a catastrophe. You and Puck are both horrible.”

“Wow, haven’t heard *crummy* used in a while…and dang, how stubborn can you be?”

“Go away.”

Due to the merciless teasing earlier, Emilia was not inclined to take her teachers seriously. Tone-deafness was one of those sorts of problems that could not be fixed if the patient didn’t want to be fixed. As such, Emilia first needed to face her problem head-on.

“What I don’t understand is, how can somebody who’s usually

so openhearted be so stubborn when it comes to singing?" Subaru asked.

"Well, it's humiliating. You and Liliana are both good singers. Meanwhile, I'm obliviously tone-deaf. I just…don't want to believe it."

"Aww, that's actually very cute. But we can't have you acting like that…"

As Emilia turned her back on them and blushed, her guard was starting to weaken. However, knowing that wasn't enough to sway her decisively, Subaru cracked his neck and said, "The best way to make a tone-deaf person self-aware—is to have her objectively listen to herself sing. Ideally, we'd use something to record you singing, but unfortunately, such a convenient item does not exist here."

And so, giving up on technology, Subaru decided to try out a more primitive method.

"What's that…a bucket?"

"Let me introduce today's guest: Mr. Bucket. This guest lecturer is going to show Emilia-tan here how tone-deaf she is. Don't worry, he's had a bath, so this is completely hygienic."

"How exactly are we supposed to use…Mr. Bucket?" Puck asked. "Can I get inside of him?"

"I understand the feline urge to climb into cozy-looking spots, but not now. Mr. Bucket is easy to use—we put it on Emilia's head and have her sing."

"Huh—?"

"Pfft, I say."

At Subaru's suggestion, Emilia gasped, and Beatrice burst out laughing.

"Um…sorry, I think I misheard that," Emilia said. "*What* do I do with this bucket?"

Subaru smiled and held out the bucket. "You wear it on your head. Then you sing. You're gonna be a bucket-headed heroine now."

"Stupid Subaru! And here I was trying to take you seriously!"

In her anger, Emilia attempted another escape. But Subaru quickly grabbed her arm.

"Whoa, hold up! No, Emilia, I'm not joking, okay? If you put this on your head and sing, your voice bounces off the bucket walls, and it's easier for you to hear it! I'm not lying, I swear!"

“This is your just deserts for lying all the time, I suppose. You’re just like the farrow tamer in *Hoshin of the Wilderness*.”

“Sounds like you’re calling me the boy who cried wolf, loli-menace! Just shut up for a while.”

After pausing to shut down Beatrice, Subaru turned back to Emilia to explain his case again while she leveled her withering gaze at him. The last time she stared at him so harshly might just have been the day he was first summoned to this world, when she had introduced herself with a witch’s name and Subaru had unknowingly used it when talking with her.

In any case, Subaru was desperate to communicate his sincerity, especially after the bucket suggestion had shaken Emilia’s trust in him.

“If you hear yourself sing, you’ll understand what level you’re at! I’m telling the truth, I swear—just take my word for it and you’ll see for yourself!”

“Just take your word for it? Gee, that’s convincing! Well, I’m done with being tricked, thank you!”

“So untrusting! Who made you like this…”

“Only yesterday, you told me to *just take your word for it* and made me eat some bad mayonnaise! Just remembering how upset I was is making me angry all over again!”

“Shit, it was *me*? Stupid past-Subaru! But I’m a different man today, Emilia. I’ve changed for you!”

Though she got the sense that Subaru was trying to drag her down a bad path by steamrolling her, Emilia yielded all the same. She looked down at the bucket in her hands, timidly raised it above her head, and said, “You won’t laugh at me?”

“No, I won’t laugh. I would never laugh at you.”

“You promise?”

“Even if everybody else laughs at you, I promise I won’t.”

“Is that really the best thing to say right now?”

Subaru flat-out ignored the question that came from Puck, who sat on his shoulder. His entire being was focused on getting Emilia to put the bucket on her head. He didn’t regret any clichéd promises he had to deliver to make that happen.

Emboldened by Subaru’s reassurance, Emilia put the bucket over her determined face. The bulky sides completely covered her head—and the bucket heroine burst onto the scene.

“I knew this is what Emilia-tan was going to look like, but for

some reason, seeing her like this makes my heart break…"

"Don't worry, Lia. Even with a bucket on your head, you're still the prettiest girl in the world."

Subaru's guilt got the better of him while Puck's paternal love for Emilia remained steadfast, no matter what her appearance. Subaru lamented that his love wasn't as deep as Puck's, but he still got the sense that their encouraging words had done little to bring Emilia any joy.

"Pfft, I suppose."

And even with a book covering her face, Beatrice's failed attempt at masking her laughter was painfully obvious.

And under all that scrutiny, Emilia bravely turned her bucket face toward Subaru and said, "So you just want me to sing like this? It's *really* constrictive, though—whoa! My voice!"

"Yeah, most people don't get an opportunity to hear what they really sound like. Keep the bucket on and just sing for fun like you normally would. I'll even accompany you."

Emilia shook her bucket head side to side at Subaru's offer for lyulyre assistance. The effect was quite absurd, but even with a bucket on her head, Emilia kept her dignified tone and said, "I'll be fine. I want to try singing on my own at first."

"Oh yeah? Well, let me know if you need any help. I'll, um, give you all the half-assed strumming I can muster."

It was questionable just how much of a help Subaru's third-rate guitar skills could be for Emilia's tone-deafness. In reply, Bucket-Head Emilia tucked her chin in a frown. And then—

"La…la…lalala…"

Without Subaru's help, Emilia hummed a little rhythm and started her song. The bucket muffled the sound of her voice, but there was no dramatic change in her singing. In other words, she was still singing out of tune, but if everything went according to plan, Emilia ought to be able to hear it this time.

"Terrible," Puck lamented.

"Yeah, terrible," Subaru echoed emotionally.

And adding insult to injury…

"*Beyond* terrible, I suppose."

Beatrice, who had declared a forgiving tolerance for Liliana's music, twisted her face in disgust.

A person's talent for music was left to fate. It would be a mistake to blame Emilia for what she lacked. However—

“Ahh—”

“Oh?”

With a lingering, gravelly note, the pathetic song abruptly cut off. And as the trio watched dubiously, Emilia lifted the bucket off her head. Her silvery locks tumbling around her face, Emilia freed herself from the bucket.

And then—

“I’m sorry…but please give me some time alone.”

And with that, the now self-aware tone-deaf girl sadly retreated from the Archive of Forbidden Books.

“No, wait—you can’t run! That’s all you’ve been doing today!”

Quickly regaining his wits, Subaru made a mad dash after her.

5

“Emilia-tan has come to terms with her faults and has committed to taking lessons to get a voice that matches how wonderful she is! Her first step is gaining the ability to recognize pitch! Okay, team?!”

“O-okay!”

At first, Emilia bid a hasty retreat. But she had committed herself to Subaru’s lessons ever since her tearful return. The revelation of her own tone-deafness had greatly affected her. One couldn’t exactly call her cheerful, but her fiery zeal for learning was burning strong.

“There are two ways to learn to recognize pitch. First, listen to the same song over and over until you memorize the proper pitches. And second, put a bucket on your head and learn to correct the pitch as you go. You could also hum around the clock.”

“But how can I listen to a song with the correct pitch? Liliana isn’t here anymore…”

“Liliana isn’t the only person in this world who can sing in tune, you know? Beako would probably do the trick. Hey, Beakooo? Sing something for us.”

“What?! Why must *I* be the one to do such a thing, I wonder?”

With an aggravated sigh at Beatrice’s sudden defiance, Subaru argued, “As long as we have to do the lessons here, you might as well help. We’ll finish faster that way. And until we finish, we’re gonna be holing up in here rather frequently.”

“Mrrrggg… Still, I refuse to be ordered around by the likes of *you*.”

“Yeah, yeah, I think I know what’s going on. For all your smug critiquing, you’re a snobby little lady who’s all talk and no action. Okay, I get it. Just park yourself in the corner and read.”

“*Who* are you calling all talk and no action?! Don’t mock me, boy! Fine, I’ll help you, I suppose!”

And Beatrice gave the textbook reaction to Subaru’s reverse psychology. The ease with which she was manipulated made Subaru worry about her future, but for now, he appreciated her gullible nature.

And then the ditzy doll marched up to Emilia, pointed a finger right at her, and said, “I’m going to teach you, failure of a girl—the true *spirit* of music!”

“Uh, you don’t have to be *that* hardcore…” Subaru muttered.

“Y-yes, Professor! I eagerly await your instructions. I…promise I’ll stick with it.”

“She’s so obedient all of a sudden?!”

The sense of danger in Beatrice’s egotistical declaration actually made Emilia trust her more. From the look of her, she was ready to plunge herself into a singing bootcamp.

“Okay, to get a good sense of rhythm, it’s best to move your body while singing to practice creating the rhythm yourself,” Subaru said. “Clap your hands or stomp your feet. Just try synchronizing.”

“Okay, Lia, try clapping with me. Ready, go! One-mew, one-mew, one-mew!”

“One-m-mew, one-mew…”

Puck mimicked the clapping Subaru did during his explanation and coached Emilia in turn. Emilia grew increasingly flustered as

she tried to keep up with the spirit's soundless clapping paws.

"One-mew…eep!"

As Emilia clapped the rhythm, Beatrice put the bucket back on her head and calmly said, "All right, you'll sing with this on again, I suppose. And I'll discipline you until you can match me perfectly."

The Archive of Forbidden Books was currently hosting a girl in a bucket, a doll-like girl staring sharply at her, and a small cat spirit boisterously dancing around them—from the outside, the sight could not be more surreal.

Subaru muttered, "This is like a nightmare. It doesn't feel real… but if I had dreams like this, I'd probably see a psychiatrist."

Still, in theory, these lessons ought to cure Emilia of her tone-deafness. Everyone involved was intensely focused. Things were settled enough here that Subaru could finally tend to a problem of a different nature.

"Sorry, guys, but nature's calling me."

"What is nature calling you about? I have no idea what you're saying, I suppose."

"The *bathroom*. There, now you made me say it. How embarrassing."

After giving Beatrice a moment of smug satisfaction, Subaru left the room. He stole a glance at Emilia, and she seemed anxious, but as there was a bucket on her head, he couldn't know for sure.

When Subaru left the Archive, Beatrice's Passage was triggered. It was a liminal space connecting you with any door you wanted in the mansion, and this time, it spit him out directly beside Roswaal's study. It was something Beatrice could only have done *because* she knew exactly what Subaru intended to do under the pretense of going to the restroom.

"That snarky little loli…" Subaru muttered under his breath as he knocked at the door to Roswaal's study. "Rozchi? It's me. Can I come in?"

"Indeed, you may, my boy! I was hoping you would come by rather soon to have a little chat with meee."

Gaining permission from the room's master, Subaru boldly entered the study. Sitting at the ebony desk of the spacious room was the eccentric clown-faced master of the house—Roswaal L Mathers. He beheld his underling Subaru with his heterochromatic eyes and said, "Nowww, it sounds like you've gotten Emilia caught up in some *scrumptious* drama again."

“I didn’t ‘get her caught up in it,’ exactly. Emilia was actually the one who kicked things off this time. I’m sure there’s a ton of things you want to say to me right now, but please, take it easy on me just this once.”

“So you’re saying I should overlook her neglecting her studies when the royal selection is just around the corner?”

Roswaal’s jab stung, but his eyes were playful. He eagerly awaited Subaru’s excuse with open arms. Subaru sighed, lamenting his master of strange fancies.

“It might look like we’re wasting time, but taking a breather is important. Especially now. Everyone—including you—must’ve noticed she’s getting herself wound up way too tightly these days.”

The very day Subaru was summoned into this world, her badge was stolen in the capital. Right after that, demon beasts terrorized the marquis’s lands, and the very next day after that, Liliana brought more trouble into their lives. However, even though Emilia was involved in every incident, she did not directly confront and resolve the problems herself.

Given her position, she wasn’t allowed to purposefully put herself in danger, but this probably made her painfully aware of her own helplessness. And Subaru theorized that this had directly led to her overcrowded schedule.

Emilia would not hesitate to push herself beyond her limits to help someone else. The fact that she would surrender her limited free time to Subaru was evidence of this. Evidence that, if true, warmed Subaru’s heart.

“If you ask me, I wish she would work just a liiittle harder, though,” the marquis said.

“But singing lessons should improve her diaphragmatic breathing, making her a louder and stronger orator! And if she cures her tone-deafness, that will boost her confidence and mood! And if news of her beautiful singing voice spreads throughout the land, as a monarch and a songstress, Emilia will become a double threat—!”

“Ohh, fine, fine, I understaaand. I’ll allow this…‘breather,’ as you say.”

Roswaal raised a white flag from beneath the pile of sales pitches Subaru hurled at him. That being said, it was not Subaru’s words that had moved the marquis, but his consideration for Emilia’s mood as of late.

“You were the one who showed Emilia the lyulyre in the first place, weren’t you, Rozchi? I don’t know what kind of 4D chess you’re playing, but wouldn’t ya say things are going exactly the way you want?”

“When you’re in my position, there are quite a few of annoyances, my boy. And there’s Emilia’s personality to consider. I *could* always ask her to rest now and then, but would she listen?”

“Nope, she wouldn’t. She’d smile and nod, then sneak off and work herself extra hard behind closed doors. I can practically see it.”

And she shone so brightly when she got like that. Which was probably why he longed to support her. Whatever ulterior motives Roswaal might have, he was Emilia’s backer. So while their hearts were surely in different places, Roswaal’s ulterior motives were not the priority on this day.

“Be that as it maaay…is Emilia’s singing really that terrible?”

“It is. For someone with such a pretty speaking voice, it’s a miracle she sings so terribly.”

“Oh, there you go again. Aren’t you exaggerating a little?”

“It’s the same feeling you’d get if somebody took the gourmet meal of everybody’s dreams and burned it to a crisp on a griddle.”

“Oh dear, what a waste.”

“Yeah, it is.”

It was a cruel truth that no amount of sympathy could hide.

After they shared a painful nod of understanding, Subaru raised a hand at Roswaal and said, “I’d better head back to the Archive. I told everybody I was going to use the restroom, so if I’m gone too long, they’ll think it was number two.”

“I think *more* than enough time has passed for them to make that assumption. Having said that, take good care of Emilia for me.”

“I will. Just for a little while longer…I’m gonna let Emilia be Emilia-*tan*.”

“Oh my, oh *my*…ha-ha-ha, what a way of words you have, my boy.” Roswaal chuckled loudly at Subaru’s roundabout way of talking.

Now that their mutual understanding had been renewed, Subaru left the marquis’s study with his newly acquired permission.

“Okay, I’m going back…but has Beako changed the room location already?”

He started by opening the door next to the study that should

connect to the Archive of Forbidden Books. Ordinarily, the Archive's position would have moved, leaving him with a reference room full of papers. However—

"Ooh, sweet. I'm in."

Luckily, the Passage had not been moved, and Subaru returned to the Archive without any difficulty.

"I'm back, guys! Man, there was such a long line at the bathroom…"

Giving a canned excuse as he entered the Archive, Subaru surveyed the trio standing in the room. They hadn't moved since he left. There stood Emilia, Beatrice, Puck, and—

"Nooo! Please, spare me! I'm begging you, *anything* but that!"

"My patience has worn thin, I suppose! You are making a mockery out of music! Step right outside with that bucket on your head and sing! I know what you lack—a sense of *urgency*!"

"Betty, sweet Betty? Please don't force poor Lia to do something she doesn't want to. Just give her a break. Even if she's tone-deaf, she's still a cutie."

"But you're too soft on her! *That* is the cause of her impudence, I suppose!"

With her sleeves rolled up, Beatrice meant business. She was yanking on bucket-headed Emilia's hips while the latter clung onto the bookcase. Puck, meanwhile, was flying around them both and clapping his hands.

Subaru's eyes glazed over. How much chaos could have possibly ensued during the ten minutes he was gone? He had a vague sense, and if he was right, there was little he could do aside from sighing in defeat.

In either case—

"So I originally started this exercise as a sort of fun way to help Emilia blow off some steam…but is this actually helping her relax at all? I'm beginning to think we put the cart before the horse here…"

Feeling vaguely worried that his promise to Roswaal had already been broken, Subaru had no choice but to insert himself into the trio's chaotic lesson.

6

"Okay, Emilia-tan. Do you think the lessons have yielded any

results? Think you can sing better?"

"I won't let you down, Subaru. Thanks to Puck's and Beatrice's hardcore training, I've been reborn. Okay…maybe that's an exaggeration, but I've gotten better."

"Ooh! Her confidence blossomed then wilted just as fast…!"

Her skin was made tougher by the strict lessons, and Emilia answered Subaru's question with pride. Her boot camp buddy, the bucket, lay at her feet, and from the polished shine on its surface, it looked almost like it was proudly watching over its pupil as she prepared to sing.

"But do you really think all that practice was enough to cure her?" Puck asked.

"If all that practicing still didn't cure her nightmarish singing, the world is doomed, I suppose."

"Hey! Peanut gallery! Don't kill her confidence! You'll see your results soon enough!" Subaru silenced the gossiping duo as Emilia did her vocal warmups.

She stood in the center of the Archive of Forbidden Books, focusing so hard on her singing that she didn't even notice them. Then she gestured to Subaru with her eyes.

"Mm…mm…mm! Okay! Subaru, I'm ready when you are."

"I've got'chu, Emilia-tan. One last thing: No matter what happens, promise me you won't cry."

"You're clearly the biggest skeptic of us all!" Beatrice barked.

On Emilia's cue, Subaru readied the lyulyre. Then, with a gentle strum, he played the soft first movement of the *Love Ballad of the Sword Devil*.

To be honest, compared to Liliana, his skills left much to be desired—

"But when Emilia-tan gives her all, how pathetic would I be if I played it safe?"

Besides, if Emilia were to embarrass herself, Subaru could share some of her shame if he played poorly. Even before she began singing, his mind was swimming with ideas of how to cover for her—that was the sheer impact her tone-deafness had.

As such, his expectations for her culminating performance were low—

"La…la…lalala."

Once she got past the prelude, a bell-like tone spilled from Emilia's lips. The moment Subaru heard her, he gasped. Puck and

Beatrice's eyes shot open behind him.

Because her sound, flow, and pitch were perfect.

Closing her eyes and swaying her shoulders back and forth, she let the music take over, Emilia channeled all her feelings into her singing. She stayed on the beat as practiced, matched the pitch as told, and sang the song as taught.

And from the ashes—a voice as clear as the chiming of silver bells was born. A voice so angelic and so bewitching that it would enthrall anyone who heard it.

Emilia had said she never took singing lessons. She didn't know the first thing about proper singing technique. It would not be hyperbole to say that her singing before was torture to listen to.

But Emilia, devoted and pure at her core, had thrown herself into her practice to overcome her shortcomings. And she had absorbed the lessons like a sponge soaked up water—

"Hmm!"

Subaru frantically shook himself out of his rapturous daze and focused on his strumming. Emilia's singing was so bewitching that Subaru's lyulyre had started lagging and falling out of sync. He played as hard as he could, desperate to not fall behind any further.

"—Thank you very much."

In time, the trance-like performance came to an end. With Emilia's bow, Subaru snapped back to his senses.

When her song finished, Emilia lifted her face and timidly checked her audience's reaction. She was unaware how bad she sounded before, so naturally, she also had no idea how her singing sounded now.

"W-was I still terrible? That makes sense. If tone-deafness could be cured so easily, it wouldn't be such a big deal…"

She was so oblivious that she immediately misinterpreted their shocked silence.

Subaru had to shake his head to dispel his awe before running up to Emilia and saying, "Nononono! Emilia-tan—that was *awesome*! Where did that death rattle from earlier run off to?!"

"*Death rattle*—what are you talking about?!" At first, Emilia was taken aback by the unfamiliar criticism, but then she tilted her head in confusion and asked Subaru, "Wait a minute…did I get a little better?"

"Not a little. You were perfect—*perfectamundo*! It was like, *that's* what we wanted to hear all along!"

Puck jumped on the bandwagon and followed Subaru's compliment with gushing praise. "Yup, yup, you were amazing, Lia! That's my Lia—sweetest girl in the world!"

Emilia stared at the cat on her shoulder, then at Subaru with big round eyes. From the look of her, she still didn't believe it—

"Brother is right, I suppose. It wasn't bad."

"Beatrice…"

"But don't get cocky. You still need to practice, I suppose. You are grossly inadequate compared to that bard girl whose only talent is singing."

Beatrice praised Emilia's singing while dissing Liliana with a backhanded compliment. When she heard those words, it finally seemed to sink in. Putting her hands to her mouth, Emilia said, "I'm so happy to hear that—I'm not tone-deaf anymore, then. I overcame my tone-deafness!"

"You did! I dunno why, but I feel a *crazy* sense of accomplishment! Even though she's just tone-deaf!"

"Hey, I'm not tone-deaf. I'm *formerly* tone-deaf. Let's get our terms straight."

Subaru and Puck nodded gently at Emilia as she wiped tears from her eyes. As Emilia got a little choked up, Beatrice shot a tired sigh at the trio and said, "Anyway, your work is done. Now, might you leave my Archive, I wonder?"

"Ohh, right. Sorry about that. But we owe our success to you, Beako. Thanks."

"I only helped because I felt sorry for my beloved brother… that's all. Besides, I suppose some parts of the song still needed a little help. Like that *hm-hm-hmmm-hm-hm* part at the beginning."

Beatrice, who was already shooing them out of the Archive, paused briefly to give Emilia some corrections as a parting gift. And the moment she hummed the part of the song, the air in the Archive of Forbidden Books froze solid.

Subaru, Emilia, and Puck…all three turned to look at Beatrice, their cheeks tense.

"Wh-what is it, I wonder? You all look strange."

"Beako…what were you humming just now? Not the intro to *Love Ballad of the Sword Devil*, I hope?"

"What else could it have been? Nothing else, I suppose," Beatrice boldly declared without a hint of doubt in her voice.

And from the way she puffed out her flat chest, Subaru

understood. He turned to Emilia and Puck behind him and said, “Emilia-tan—”

“It’s all right, Subaru,” Emilia nodded. “I know what you’re thinking.”

At that moment, Emilia’s and Subaru’s minds were linked. Without a word, Emilia swept the all-important item off the ground and walked over to Beatrice.

“Hey…what do you think you’re doing?” Beatrice demanded to know as she approached.

It wasn’t Emilia who answered, but Subaru. “Isn’t it obvious? You’re about to become Bucket-Head Heroine II,” Subaru said proudly, pointing at the bucket in Emilia’s hands.

The little girl who had so arrogantly waxed poetic about the *spirit of music*—was every bit as tone-deaf as the half-elf angel.

“So you’re an oblivious tone-deaf girl, too! What the hell is wrong with this mansion?! Why are you music-loving, pretty-voiced girls like this—what a waste! What did you *do* in your past lives to deserve this karma?!”

“Me, tone-deaf? Impossible, I suppose! What a severe accusation! Don’t take it out on me just because you have a thing for that girl! It’s *insidious*!”

“Beatrice, it’s okay! Professor Bucket here helped me overcome my problem. Just put him on, sing, and you’ll get better! Come on, put it on! Put it—ah, you look so cute!”

“*GREEE*—I suppose! *GRAAA*—I wonder! I’ll never do it! *Never*!”

Flapping and running, the trio ran in a big circle, trying to get the bucket on and off her head. Hovering above the trio, Puck laughed, groomed his face, and said, “Hmmm… So much for the *spirit of music*. It’ll be a long while before they can all appreciate the *art of the muses*.”

With a pretentious air in his voice, Puck ended the day of chaos that had begun with the fateful appearance of a lyulyre.

RAM'S ORDER

1

Deep, deep in the forest—

Grass and fragrant earth tangled and shrouded his feet as he walked in the dark. The gloom that obscured the view a few feet ahead was the result of the sunlight's inability to penetrate the canopy of branches hanging over his head. In the deep green, Subaru tread carefully.

Lost in the darkness, his perception of time had grown vague. He had gotten ready at dawn and entered the forest first thing that morning, but he wouldn't have been surprised to find that the sun had already sunk and night had already come outside the woods.

As his fatigue rose, so did his unease. But every time fear reached out to him, a firm but cheerful voice give his heart a much needed talking-to.

"Well, no need to worry about it being nighttime or anything. I still have a physical form—see?"

Smirking at the cheerful voice and those words, Subaru looked up at his companion currently sitting atop his head and said, "You sure don't have any wiggle room when it comes to the end of our workday, eh, Dad? Just don't forget to light a flare overhead to show where I am before you run out of power and clock out for the day."

"Hey now, do I really seem like I'd forget such an important task? I may look careless sometimes, but when Lia entrusts something to me, I make sure I get the job done!"

The cat spirit—Puck—answered Subaru from atop his head with a chuckle into his paw. The cat stroked his furry chin thoughtfully and added, "Still, I'm surprised we haven't found it yet."

"Yeah—you said it. I'm just waiting for the countdown to true panic to start."

“Heh-heh, such bravado! You’re a man, all right.”

Subaru stuck his tongue out at the spirit for immediately seeing through his facade. Even with Puck accompanying him, walking through a dark forest afflicted him with a fear that was hard to shake.

And how did he find himself in this situation?

“Ram…if I die because of this, I’m haunting your ass.”

Cursing at the monotonous scenery, Subaru spat the name of his lost companion. She was the final member of the unlikely party that had entered the forest. Reuniting with the arrogant girl with a big mop of pink hair was Subaru’s top priority at the moment.

“According to superstition, spirits become hollows when people die, but in most cases, hollows tend to be stuck wherever the person died,” Puck said.

“Oh, right. Earthbound spirits. And?”

“Wouldn’t it be funny if you got lost in the forest, died, turned into a hollow, and had to stay lost in that same forest forever?”

“Talk about a lifetime regret!”

Their banter eased Subaru’s fears slightly. Grateful for the floating spirit’s tact, Subaru wiped the sweat off his brow and returned his focus to the path ahead.

Knowing he wasn’t alone in this dark, quiet forest was the main thing keeping him from going over the edge. Which made him feel even more strongly—

I need to find the girl who really is all alone in the forest as soon as possible.

2

It all began a little more than a day ago—the afternoon before Subaru and his party entered the forest.

“Ahh. How peaceful…”

Lazily leaning his torso over the dining table, Subaru felt quite cozy. He was dressed in his mostly black servant’s uniform, which, even charitably put, did not suit him. Still, the sense that *the clothes were wearing him* had faded since his first day on the job, and he looked more presentable now.

At the very least, that’s what he thought when he looked at himself in the mirror first thing in the morning.

“You seem *really* cheerful today, Subaru. Something good happen?”

Sitting beside Subaru with a curious tilt of her head was Emilia, her silvery hair in a braid. Her beautiful hair changed styles every day, and Subaru enjoyed the variety of forms her loveliness took.

“Something good did happen—you look really pretty today, Emilia-tan. You’re like a blessed rain, showering me with new joys each and every day.”

“Do I really look that damp today?”

“You thought I was comparing you to a *monsoon day*?!”

Emilia was so oblivious that standard pickup lines never worked on her. Though Subaru was well aware of this, it gave him the freedom to say even the most shameless things.

“I guess I’m starting to get used to her giving me the cold shoulder…I mean, yeah, a part of me definitely wants her to take me seriously, but that is just how complicated and unfathomable a man’s heart is…!”

“There he goes again, ranting to himself. Boys are so complicated…ooh! This tea is good.”

While Subaru agonized over his conflicting feelings, Emilia brought her cup to her lips and smiled softly over the flavor.

It was afternoon tea at Roswaal Manor—everyone had made a habit of gathering in the dining hall after lunch to rest the mind and body. Staff would put aside their daily duties for a moment, and Emilia took a break from her studies. Anyone with a moment to spare made their way to the dining hall to enjoy a quiet respite. It was a custom that had somehow taken root ever since Subaru came to reside at the mansion.

And naturally, since only those who happened to be free participated, you would never find every resident of the mansion there at the same time. The perfect attendance award only went to Subaru, who finished his chores early so he could see Emilia, and Emilia, who always kept this teatime in her schedule.

It wasn’t easy to get everyone to attend tea. And today was no exception.

“Rem and Rozchi I can understand—they’re busy with work—but it wouldn’t hurt Beako to be more social.” Subaru frowned, particularly salty about the girl who had no work yet didn’t make an appearance. Seeing the sour look on Subaru’s face, Emilia clapped a hand to her mouth and giggled.

“Subaru, you really do like Beatrice, don’t you? You’re always so mindful of her.”

“*Like* is a strong word… I won’t deny that she is on my mind a lot, but there’s gotta be a better way of describing my feelings for her…It’s like when you get a piece of squid jerky stuck between your back molars?”

If Beatrice heard Subaru’s assessment of her, that would have brought about another quarrel, but Emilia was even more amused, smirking over Subaru’s lackluster demeanor.

So the two were enjoying a lovely little teatime like this. Until —

“You sure look like you’re enjoying yourselves.”

A voice suddenly barged into the dining hall—a stiff, icy voice. It came from a girl standing at the entrance of the dining hall between the double doors.

Her emotionless eyes glanced at the prune-faced Subaru, and she said, “I was gracious enough to make tea, yet you cast it aside in favor of debauchery… You’ve gotten too big for your britches, *Barusu*.”

“Hey, Emilia and I were just talking—you call that *debauchery*?! Besides, nobody asked you to get tea. I did nothing wrong, okay?”

“I don’t like that you were having the time of your life while I had to work.”

“Dude, don’t be a tyrant…!”

As Subaru rolled his eyes at the injustice, Ram, without a hint of charm in her eyes, snorted and said, “I was merely adding bias to impartiality and assessing your work ethic.”

“Keep your pesky bias out of your impartiality and assess me properly, dammit.”

“But if I removed bias from my assessment, your teacakes would be served off the floor, Barusu.”

“Why does your assessment get *worse* when you remove your bias?!”

Since the look in Ram’s eyes suggested she might fight him any second, he could not hide the hair-raising resentment in his voice. While Subaru fumed, Ram set the plate of cakes she had brought onto the table. Meanwhile, Subaru filled his empty cup with tea and poured another cup at the empty spot across from him for Ram.

And as the pair finished setting the table for tea, Emilia giggled quietly.

“What’s up, Emilia-tan? Why the cute face?”

“Well, you’re both in perfect sync when you squabble with each other. It’s funny to watch.”

With a revolted look on her face, Ram muttered, “Disgusting.”

“Not so blunt—that hurt!” Subaru cried, clutching a hand to his chest. “But Emilia-tan does have a point. After all, I work with you more than anyone else in this mansion, Ram. We’re in the trenches together day in and day out—it’s only natural that we wind up working in sync. Right?”

“Revolting.”

“Could we try to have an actual conversation?!”

As usual, she wouldn’t so much as throw him a bone. His perseverance was almost praiseworthy. Such was Subaru’s place in the Roswaal Manor hierarchy. Emilia ignored his advances, Beatrice snapped at him, and Ram gave him the cold shoulder—only Rem was nicer than necessary with him. He considered himself beyond blessed to be there.

“Still, it’s not like you to bake sweets, Ram. Now, Rem I’d expect to bake us a cake, but I didn’t realize her elder sister had any talents besides steaming sweet potatoes.”

“Spare me your delirious ramblings, Barusu. I thought I told you—my specialty is steamed sweet potatoes. I don’t know the first thing about baking.”

“What the hell are you doing to your poor, overworked sister who can’t even make it to tea?”

Subaru was shocked when he read between the lines and realized she had made Rem bake the cakes. Remembering how sorry Rem had looked when she informed them she was too busy to make it to tea left a bad taste in his mouth despite how sweet the cakes were.

“But you know, meals at this mansion are dependent on Rem. Not trying to come to your defense here, Ram, but as someone who can’t cook, I acknowledge I’m a hypocrite for pointing that out.”

After all, in his world, Subaru was a good-for-nothing nobody who could not be fixed even if somebody tried. He cut class, didn’t help out around the house, and aside from the unexpected talents of sewing and bedmaking, he was a supernova in the Slackers Universe.

Due to this emotional baggage, Subaru peered over at Emilia in an attempt to change the subject. Emilia covered her puffed-up

cheeks with her hands and said, “Me? Heh-*heh*, well, you probably think I’m a lousy cook, Subaru, but I’m actually pretty good. I lived alone—well, Puck was with me—for quite a long time. Basic dishes are as easy as pie for me.”

“Gee, haven’t heard the saying *as easy as pie* in a while…but how do I put this? Even though your story does add up, knowing you makes it seem just a tad bit suspect.”

And that was because angelic Emilia emitted the aura of a girl who looked capable but secretly wasn’t.

Subaru’s first impression of Emilia had changed drastically during the several hours they spent together at the mansion. Her strong genius vibes from their first encounter had melted away due to the glimpses of childishness and gullibility she had shown every day. Even so, her devotedness, kindness, and diligence were steadfast. And Subaru could say with confidence that that was what made her great.

But setting that aside, it was also undeniable that she had an air of *flawed beauty* about her. And with the discovery of her tone-deafness the other day, Subaru had a feeling there was an even bigger bombshell still hiding inside of her.

As Subaru gazed at her with worry, Emilia puffed her cheeks indignantly and said, “Grrr—you don’t believe me. Hmph! Fine. If you really doubt me, then I’ll cook something for you. Get ready. You’re going to be *really* surprised!”

“What’s this? I triggered a home-cooking flag without even meaning to? Am I gonna die?”

It’s tragic that the backlash after good news always made Subaru suspicious. Ever since Subaru arrived in this world, he couldn’t deny the imbalance of good and evil events. And since all the bad events preceded the good, whenever a good event came up first, it only made him all the more anxious.

And if this good event was to be canceled, what by? If Subaru’s intuition was correct, Emilia would be a terrible cook, and Subaru would die the instant he took a bite.

“Subaru, are you okay?” Emilia asked. “Your eyes are wandering. Got a stomachache?”

“I-I’m fine. Even if I got the worst heartburn ever, I would eat every last drop of the food you made, Emilia-tan. Please believe in me.”

“Fine, but could *you* please believe in *me* first?!”

Subaru's nonsensical fantasy had plunged Emilia into a full pout. Ordinarily, this was where Ram would deliver another brutal zinger—but the zinger never came.

"Uh—Ram? Something wrong?"

Subaru cautiously looked over his shoulder to find Ram staring intently at her tea in silence. Then she took a careful sip to wet her lips and looked in Subaru's direction. Her gaze turned Subaru's spine to ice. Her already chilly glare had leveled up.

"Um—Ram—is something the matter…?"

"*Barusu*…this tea…where from the tea shelf did you get it?"

"The tea? Oh, so it's about the tea! Well, you know, it's the stuff hidden in the back of the tea shelf. I assumed it was expensive, so I sneaked it out and—owowowowow?!"

"Eep! Subaru?!"

No sooner had Subaru confessed to his treasure hunt than his treasure was poured over him. His head dripped with scalding hot tea, and Subaru fell to the floor. A flustered Emilia tried to help by tossing the contents of the water pitcher on him. As Subaru lay drenched in hot tea and cold water, Emilia stared harshly at the suddenly violent Ram and yelled, "Why did you do that, Ram?! You've made Subaru's clothes *and* the floor all dirty!"

"I also got *burned*, you know!"

The air filled with Emilia's misplaced scolding and Subaru's screaming. But Ram reacted to neither. Emilia and Subaru exchanged concerned glances.

"Er, Psycho-Ram? What's—"

"How dare you…"

"Ram?"

"Now you've really messed up, Barusu." Ram's choked voice trembled with anger and uncontainable emotion.

That's why, instead of retorting, *"No,* you've *really messed up!"* all Subaru could do was exchange another concerned glance with the equally baffled Emilia.

3

It would seem that Subaru's offense of using the special tea without permission could not be forgiven by mere punishment.

Subaru was right to recognize that this tea was special. The problem was that he didn't know *why* it was special. It wasn't the

flavor, the quality, the price, or anything like that. It was the tea's effects.

"That tea improves mana circulation within the body. It works on old wounds, too."

"By old wounds, you mean…"

"My horn," Ram answered bluntly.

Now Subaru was the emotional one. "O-ohh…now I get it. Your horn…"

The twins Ram and Rem were born as Oni, a race of demi-humans. Outwardly, the sisters had no differences from ordinary humans, except for one: When they got emotional, a white horn would grow from their forehead. Ram, however, had lost her horn and called herself hornless.

Subaru hadn't heard the details of how she lost her horn, but even he understood it was a sensitive topic. Enough so that when he heard that the tea leaves could treat old wounds, he was racked with guilt.

"So…where can you find that tea?" Subaru asked. "This was completely my fault. I'll pay you back, even if it takes my whole life…"

Ram frowned. "Sorry to disappoint, but horn-restoring tea isn't something you can just waltz into any store and buy. That tea was one of a kind. I made it by combining effective medicinal herbs and then adjusted its taste to my liking."

"Yikes, for real? Sooo…how hard is it for you if you don't have that tea?"

"It's nothing serious. I'm just going to have many sleepless nights from now on."

"I'm so sorry!"

Since it was a bigger deal than he'd bargained for, Subaru's only recourse was to fall on his knees and beg forgiveness. He had casually committed an atrocity—human history in a nutshell.

Righting this wrong would be no small task.

"So where exactly do you find the ingredients for your original blend?"

Unable to let his guilt go, Subaru sat up straight on the floor and blurted the offer. Ram looked down at him, crossed her arms, and smiled faintly. Something about her smile filled him with chills.

"Aha, so you intend to help me gather the ingredients?"

"Well, of course. It was my fault…but, erm, Madam Ram, what

is that terrifying glint in your eye I see?"

"Fear not. They won't take too long to gather. Everything can be sourced near this mansion."

As Ram smiled and said the word "sourced," Subaru's mind wandered not to foraging but hunting…and he wished he was just imagining it.

Ultimately, it was decided that the search for the special tea ingredients would commence the following day. Incidentally, the strain on Ram's body was increasing by the day, so time was of the essence. Luckily, since the tea ingredients could be found in the mountain forest near the mansion, that only meant a day's hike to retrieve them.

"Ideally, I should go with you…" Rem apologized.

"What can you do? Ram and me being gone is one thing, but this mansion would cease to function if you were also gone for an entire day, Rem. It's a right-man-right-place sort of thing. Then again, I'm not super sure I'm the right man or that the mountain is the right place…"

It was so early that the sun was not yet up as four shadowed figures gathered in the mansion's entrance hall. They consisted of Subaru and Ram, who would head out into the mountains, and Emilia and Rem, who had come to see them off.

Emilia and Rem couldn't accompany them due to their positions in the mansion. Because of this, Rem worried herself sick all night and was still giving Ram advice every few minutes.

"Sister, Sister, please be wary of Subaru when you're on the mountain. Also, make sure Subaru doesn't touch any dangerous leaves by accident. Don't step on mossy rocks—you'll slip. Also, if you happen to fall, I have a little chant that will make you stop crying—"

"I'm good, thanks! I promise I won't cry if I fall! Please, I'm not that fragile!" Subaru yelped.

"Yes, yes, understood, Rem. If Barusu cries, I should spit on his knee, right?"

"Thanks for ruining it. *Kiss it and make it better!*"

As Rem's worries quickly veered into overprotectiveness, Ram's expected response was perfunctory. And while this little bit of banter was happening, Emilia sleepily stifled a yawn. She said, "You should be okay with Ram nearby, but *don't* do anything reckless or

beyond your capabilities, okay? Be mindful of the weather and insects. You might swell up if they sting you."

"Don't worry, if that happens, I'll count on you to gently care for my swollen limbs, Emilia-tan. Also, it's a real help, but are you sure you're okay with letting me borrow Puck?"

As Subaru asked this, the pendant Emilia usually wore around her neck hung from his. The glowing green crystal on it housed Puck, the spirit Emilia shared a covenant with. Emilia gave Subaru the final bit of insurance when he decided to go into the mountain forest with Ram.

"Don't worry, I asked him last night. Besides, Puck would only interfere with my studies if he stayed behind. I'd feel much safer having him with you, Subaru."

"W-well, okay then, I'll take you up on your kind offer and borrow your kitty." With a sheepish grin, he tugged on the pendant with his fingers. The spirit inside was supposed to come out naturally when it was time to wake up. He would have to wait until he reached the mountain to behold those powers.

"Not that I think it will, but if anything bad does happen up on the mountain, Puck will let me know. I'll know your location immediately. Rem should be able to fly to your rescue, so don't worry. Is that okay?"

"I'd feel bad making you call a rescue party if I get lost mountain climbing, so I'll be careful," Subaru said, grateful for Emilia's thoughtfulness as he tapped the floor with the toe of his worn-in sneakers. He was dressed in his sweats for comfort during their hike. And with a bag on his back to gather the tea ingredients, his Backpacker Subaru costume was complete.

"Barusu—you ready? We're leaving."

"Sure thing, Missy, your wish is my command." After giving a reply to Ram's usual curt tone, Subaru turned to Emilia and Rem and said, "Well, see you later. Sorry for the extra workload, Rem."

"No problem. I've packed a lunch in your bag. Do share it with my sister."

"And since I can't stand to keep it a secret, I'll tell you I've included a special treat of my very own. Try guessing what it is!"

And as the still-worried Rem and picnic-on-the-brain Emilia waved good-bye, Subaru and Ram set off into the morning mist, where the mountain awaited them.

They were out of the mansion and away from the well-traveled road that led to Earlham Village. As they left the town road and entered the mountain trail, Subaru posed a question to the slender back of the girl walking in front of him.

“Now, about those tea ingredients…what exactly do you need again?”

Ram held up four fingers, and without turning back, she answered, “There are four ingredients in total. First, we need mylegia blossoms. They’re a rare blue flower, but you can find them in the field where you tried to seduce Emilia.”

“H-ho-*how* do you even know about that?!”

“Since I know exactly where they are, we can get the blossoms on the way back. The second ingredient is in the forest. It’s baroe fungus, and it always grows at the root of a certain tree. I dry that and grind it into a powder—it’s poisonous, by the way.”

“It’s poisonous?! Are we gonna be okay?!”

“You’ll be fine—if anything, you’ll gain immunity. Now, the third ingredient is an eccentric one. There’s this red fruit that only grows on the top of a bolk tree—and I need the seeds.”

“Ooh, sounds like we finally got a reasonable ingredient.”

“Bolk trees are unreasonably tall, and if you touch any part of the fruit other than the seeds with your bare hands, the poison is so powerful your fingers will practically melt off—be careful with them.”

“*More* poison?! Are you the type of character who needs poison to live?!”

“Medicine and poison are just two sides of the same coin. They can cure or kill, depending on how you use them. Also, I forgot to mention that the mylegia blossoms aren’t poisonous—they are carnivorous, though.”

“My beautiful memory with Emilia-tan—*defiled* by carnivorous plants!”

Rather, the thought that he had drunk such a lethal tea and found it delicious gave him chills. Its horn-wound curing properties were nice and all, but he worried that it might harm a normal human body.

“So…am I gonna be okay?” he cautiously asked.

“Well, I assume we’ll find out within the next twenty-four

hours."

"*Blech!* I was a guinea pig without even knowing it!"

"That was a joke. The drug takes effect immediately upon swallowing it. If it were harmful to you, you would have died during the night."

"That's not even funny! Seriously, am I gonna be okay?!"

Subaru made gagging motions with his mouth, but the tea he had drunk the day before had long been absorbed into his system. Praying that nothing bad would happen to him, Subaru focused on procuring the tea ingredients.

"So what about the final ingredient?" he asked with a sense of total dread.

"The final ingredient…well, I will keep that a secret until we find it. A special little punishment from me to you."

"A punishment worse than drinking poison?"

"You drank it of your own volition, Barusu. One could also say *you* gave *Emilia* poison."

As irony stacked on top of irony, Subaru fell deathly silent. Ram kept the fourth ingredient a secret, and the first three ingredients were all deadly. That meant either the final ingredient was surprisingly basic or something so fiercely horrifying that she hesitated to speak its name out loud. He fiercely wished it was the former and would rather be kept in the dark if it was the latter.

"You know, going into the forest with you reminds me of when we looked for Rem," Subaru remarked.

"Ah yes, when you were pathetically mauled by a dog, and Master Roswaal dashingly came to your rescue."

"The memory was indeed pathetic and dashing—you're not wrong there—but we won't have any encounters with demon beasts today, I hope? Just FYI, all I'm carrying in my equipment tab is an item bag and Shooting Star."

Shooting Star was the name Subaru had given his beloved kitchen knife. Many a vegetable had fallen to Shooting Star, but it had yet to earn its stripes in battle. If he had to fight a demon beast with it, Subaru would rather beat a pathetic retreat.

"Don't worry, Barusu, nobody expects you to be even slightly useful in a fight. Also, I'd rather Rem not scold me afterward. Why…why does the blame have to fall onto *me* anyway?"

"Um, uh, sorry about that. Oh—that's right! The Urugarum in the forest—Roswaal exterminated all of them, right? So why do we

need to beware of demon beasts?"

"Urugarum aren't the only demon beasts in the forest. In fact, now that their territory has opened up, I'd assume the demon beasts of the forest have started their turf wars, wouldn't you? No demon beasts are as dangerous as the Urugarum, but you'd be reduced to a pile of bones if you met any of them."

"Wasn't planning on meeting any demon beasts anyway…not in a billion years, thank you very much. Then again, as long as I live my life quietly and mind my own business, they won't bother me anyway."

"I wouldn't be too sure… I get the sense that your wish won't come true, Barusu."

"Dude, *why*."

"Woman's intuition."

Subaru didn't know why, but her comeback was strangely persuasive. Sensing something was amiss, Subaru directed his attention to a newly budding question. "I always wondered about this, but what exactly makes animals and demon beasts different?"

"Oh, that's simple—their origins of existence are completely different."

It wasn't Ram who answered. The familiar voice came from the pendant glowing on Subaru's chest—flecks of light spilled out, taking the shape of a cat.

The palm-sized cat spirit—Puck—floated before Subaru's eyes, stretching himself as he said, "Visually, the distinguishing difference between demon beasts and animals is the horns. And since horned animals also exist, it's more than just that. Demon beasts always have horns. You should make a note of that."

"Thanks for the explanation. But aren't you up a bit earlier than usual?"

"Well, Lia made me promise to look after you. And if I'm in my energy-saving mode, I can be around longer than usual. So fear not, I've got your mood-lifting antics covered!"

"I'm a hundred percent certain Emilia tasked you with more than just that." Subaru frowned.

The proudly pontificating Puck jumped onto Subaru's shoulder, curled into a ball, and slammed into Subaru's cheek with his tail wagging.

"O great spirit, thank you so much for being so gracious as to accompany us," Ram said.

“Mmm-hmm, no problem. I’m sure Lia likes to stretch her wings while her parents are gone now and then.”

“Oh, the considerate gentleman angle? And huh, I’m surprised to hear you speak so politely with Puck, Ram.”

“It’s just an act,” she assured him.

“So honest, so direct—I kinda like that,” Puck said graciously.

Subaru smirked and shook his head. Now that he thought about it, they made quite a strange tableau. This particular grouping had not happened a single time before at the mansion.

“I just hope we don’t turn into the Three Stooges… Emilia told you what our mission is today, I assume? Thanks for helping.”

“Yeah, I’ve got your back,” Puck said. “If it starts raining, don’t hesitate to spread me out and use me to keep out the rain.”

“Okay, one, that’s an extremely specific use, and two, you’re too small. I’d still be dripping wet.” Subaru sighed as he pictured himself holding a soaking-wet cat over his head. “By the way, Ram, the trail is starting to look legit wild now… Do you know how to tell where these ingredients are?”

“That’s a stupid question. Just how many times do you think I’ve come up this very mountain to gather the ingredients?”

“Based on your daily job performance, I’m worried that you make Rem do it for you. Anyway, do you at least have a map or something so I’ll know where they might be?”

“I’ll draw my own map in my mind. Then we’ll talk.”

“In other words, it’s a rule of thumb sorta thingy. Understood, master.”

One of the ingredients was classified, the locations were in Ram’s memory only, and Subaru was useless both in a fight and in knowledge. So why—*why* was he even there?

“I’m a packhorse and comic relief…?”

As Subaru pondered his role—responsibility aside—Puck cheerfully said, “Oh, if it’s comic relief, I’m in the running! Heh-*heh*, let’s compete to see who’s better.” His voice was so carefree that Subaru tilted his neck and smashed the spirit with his head.

“Mee-yahhh!”

“Ooh, that feels good. Yah, yah!”

“Mya! Mya! Mya!”

The fur felt so good brushing up against his cheek that Subaru kept hitting his head against the yowling Puck as he stumbled up the awkward mountain trail—

“Argh…”

—completely unaware that Ram sighed in frustration at their lack of vigilance.

5

After that, the Three Stooges encountered a barrage of problems on their adventure.

Subaru carelessly touched the plant that makes your skin swell, tripped on mossy rocks and fell, cut his hand with his Shooting Stars while trying to harvest the mushrooms, and slipped while climbing the bolk tree. He fell straight to the ground and, after giving a stellar performance in an action-packed drama, our protagonist was nearly sobbing.

Without Rem’s little magic trick, he probably would have been painfully wallowing in a puddle of his own tears by then.

“Rem is the absolute best. How could she know all this was gonna happen to me and give me some helping words…”

“If you ask me, I can’t help but feel sorry for Rem for the fact that you made all her worst worries come true. How can you so precisely ignore every single warning she gave you?”

“Hold up, don’t be so quick to judge! For starters, I *didn’t* ignore her warnings. I tried really hard but fell short! Don’t obsess over the results—gimme some credit for trying!”

“But results are everything.”

“Fine, fine, I’m so very sorry.”

His whole body was covered in a thin layer of dirt, and Subaru sat as Puck administered first aid to his scrapes. It was a surprising turn of events—he didn’t know Puck could use healing magic.

“I was the one who gave Lia her first lessons in spirit magic, you know?” Puck said. “Then again, I don’t have much aptitude for healing magic, so I can’t cure wounds as well as Betty. But a scrape like this? Ten minutes’ rest will be plenty.”

“Thanks, man. Sorry I made you use up your MP when you’ve got a time limit.”

“Don’t worry, if I suddenly disappear, you’ll be in more trouble than me—and it’ll serve you right.”

“So you won’t bother to stay longer than necessary—thanks, message received.”

His knee and elbow scrapes were now healed. Subaru gave the

flying ball of floof a grateful high five. Ram side-eyed them as she crouched beside a tiny creek far too quiet to be called a proper mountain stream. Though they couldn't drink the water, it was an ideal place to rest.

It was a bit past noon. Given their location and the state of their stomachs, Ram suggested they eat lunch. Subaru was having his wounds cured in conjunction with following her suggestion.

"The path was treacherous, but at least we secured our ingredients," he said. "We somehow managed to get the mushrooms and the fruit seeds, and we already know where the flowers are. We're in surprisingly good shape."

"I thought I told you it wasn't dangerous, Barusu. You just made it more difficult than it needed to be."

"Urrrg—I can't argue with that…"

After his series of blunders, Subaru was in no place to counter Ram's sass. As he rinsed his swollen right hand in the cool creek and patted the dirt off his tracksuit, he had only just gotten himself back to the state he was in when they first set out.

Just as he rinsed off the Shooting Stars he'd used to forage the mushrooms, he said, "While we're here, I might as well map out this river."

Eyeing the bends of the river, Subaru pulled a sheet of paper and something similar to a crayon out of his pack. Then he began sketching. His crayons only came in basic colors, but his drawing of the river was still well done. And he didn't forget to jot down little notes in Japanese here and there.

"You've been doing that ever since we got on this mountain. What kind of game is that?"

"It's *not* a game. It has a purpose!" Subaru rebuked the peeping Ram as he fished for his lunch parcel. He then thrust the fresh drawing in her face and said, "Look, it's a map. When a person explores uncharted territory, he draws a map. If there's documentation of where everything is, future travelers can avoid falling into the same traps, y'know?"

"Well, that's clever. But will this map ever need to be used? If I run out of tea, I'll just come up here to get more ingredients myself. Rem can, too, if I just tell her what I need."

As Ram questioned the necessity for the map, Subaru rolled it up with a sheepish smile. She was right. As someone who knew where all the ingredients were, she wouldn't need the map.

“Just a hypothetical…” Subaru began.

“What kind of hypothetical?”

“Let’s say you run out of tea again and you’re so sick you can’t get out of bed. And, by coincidence, Rem is away and Roswaal is out somewhere, too. So, oh, goodness gracious me, you’d have nobody to ask for help! If that happened, I could use this map to get your ingredients.”

It really was a one-in-a-million scenario—a remedy that should only be used as a last resort.

“If this map gives us insurance and peace of mind, it’s served its purpose,” Subaru finished.

It didn’t matter if it never needed to be used. However, on the off chance it was needed, Subaru would be grateful to his past self for making it. He made the lifesaving tool, *hoping* it would never need to be used. That paradoxical clash of logic and sense of purpose existed in many things.

And hearing Subaru’s answer, Ram fell silent in thought. She looked faintly surprised. Subaru scratched his head, baffled by the uncharacteristic reaction. The declaration he had just made could be rather embarrassing if taken the wrong way.

“W-well, anyway! I’m just making this so if I get lost, I’ll be able to make it home in one piece. When you put survival first, you’ve gotta take on your fair share of hardships.”

Babbling quickly to cover his embarrassment, Subaru slid the rolled-up map into his back pocket. When he returned to the mansion, he would need to make a clean copy of it, including his notes in Japanese. Even though this was his first time making a map outside a game, it was at least serviceable.

A mediocre attention to detail was one of the underconfident Subaru Natsuki’s strong suits.

Clapping his hands to reset the mood, Subaru said, “Okay, let’s eat lunch. If I don’t eat something fast, my stomach’s gonna stick to my spine!”

“Fair point—yes, let’s have lunch,” Ram agreed. She proceeded to pull out a parcel. Then, after a few moments in silent thought, she said, “Since you were uncharacteristically thoughtful, Barusu, I’ll give you a little reward.”

“Uh, what’s with the ‘uncharacteristically’ bit? You’re making me nervous—downright queasy, so I’d rather not get your reward.”

“Oh dear, my horn scar is suddenly throbbing with pain. I think

I might have a fever, too."

"Way to use my goodwill against me! Okay, *fine*! I'll take your damn reward! Hit me with your best shot!"

"No need to howl at me. I was just going to give you the largest share of lunch."

In her left hand, Ram held up the wrapped food parcel to the wishy-washy Subaru. It was about the size of a child's fist, and upon seeing it, Subaru sighed in relief.

"Way to freak me out. I had no idea what you meant. But that's a perfectly acceptable size—in fact, it's basically a normal size."

"True. Anyway, this is yours."

And just as Subaru's guard lowered, Ram took the actual parcel that she had been hiding with her right hand and shoved it into his face. Seeing it was the size of a child's head, Subaru was speechless.

"And by the clumsy shape, this one was unmistakably made by Emilia," Ram said.

"Thanks, Captain Obvious! Dammit, when she said, 'Since I can't stand to keep it a secret, I'll tell you I've included a special treat of my very own,' I knew she was full of it! She was *never* gonna keep that a secret! Not in a million years!"

He had initially envisioned Emilia standing beside Rem and just squeezing the rice balls, but his assumption was wrong. It had to be. If this is what Emilia ended up with despite working alongside Rem, then he dreaded to think about what an entire home-cooked meal might look like if Emilia was in charge.

With a glimmer of hope in his heart, Subaru took a bite. But in his line of vision, he could see the spirit shaking his head. His eyes distant with resignation, Puck said, "Lia is adorable. Maybe that's enough to excuse her from anything."

"Dammit all, I know the feeling!" Subaru cursed, deciding to bite the bullet and face reality.

Still, it was hard to believe that a rice ball's flavor could change so much depending on the hands that shaped it. Just to be sure, he took a bite of Rem's rice ball first to get a taste of her consideration before challenging his tastebuds with Emilia's rice ball.

"It's—heavy."

The mass on his knees was intensely dense. It was dense enough to deny the very concept of rice balls that existed in his mind. He took a deep breath and reached for the rice ball. Giving it a thorough looking-over—

“Wait…there’s *another* wrapper underneath?”

Taking the plunge and removing the wrapper, he found another piece of paper protecting the rice ball. She had probably made the rice ball so big that one piece of paper wouldn’t hold it together. It wasn’t until she had layered paper upon paper that the rice ball’s gargantuan mass was successfully contained.

It was no different from containing a powerful monster with layers upon layers of barrier spells.

"Anyway, what's inside…"

Annoyed by his train of thought, Subaru unwrapped the rice ball to look at its insides. He wrestled with the papers, ripping them off one by one, yet failing to reveal the rice ball inside until—

"—Oops."

Once breathless in anticipation, Ram, Puck, and Subaru grunted in unison. In his attempt to rip off the stubborn final layer of paper, the rice ball spilled onto Subaru's lap. The firm sphere bounced off the ground and rolled away.

"Wait, come back!" Subaru jumped to his feet and stumbled after the rolling rice ball. It was as if the old folktale *The Tumbling Rice Balls* had come to life. It was a freakishly perfect reenactment.

Just as the rice ball hit a slope and began to accelerate, Subaru sprang at it, his fingertips just barely catching it before it rolled downhill. He sighed in relief—but only for a moment.

"Huh?"

His leg suddenly floated, sending him into the air. A look down revealed a sudden steepness in the path beneath him, and the word *avalanche* popped into his brain.

It was a perfect reenactment of the folktale—in a wrong way, of course.

"Barusu—!"

Hearing Ram's frantic voice behind him, Subaru fell straight backward down the sudden slope, clutching the rice ball to his chest.

At least the grass is softening the blow—he thought to himself as he screamed.

6

At long last, our story returns to the duo in the first chapter: Subaru and Puck.

"When I started falling, I thought I was a dead man…" Subaru muttered.

"So did I," Puck said. "But I'm glad you didn't die. And I

established a mental link with the pink-haired girl."

"Your ability to fly saved my ass… Y'know, I wouldn't have minded if you'd picked me up and flown."

"I was worried I'd just pull your hair out."

"Why would you pick me up by my *hair*?! There are better ways!"

Sniping at each other, Subaru and Puck were en route to rendezvous with Ram. Right after Subaru finished tumbling, he grabbed ahold of Puck, who had flown down to see if he was dead. Using the spirit as a go-between, Subaru and Ram worked out where they would rendezvous. Ram had proposed descending the slope to meet him, but having experienced how steep it was firsthand, Subaru had advised her to avoid it.

"If I just climb back up the slope, I should be able to find you just fine," Subaru argued. "I don't want to put you in any danger if we can avoid it."

"Okay, I mimicked your tone and delivered the message," Puck said. "Wanna hear what she said back?"

"Hah!" Subaru scoffed, mimicking Ram's condescending tone flawlessly.

"Whoa, you sounded just like her!" Puck applauded in awe. Then, as Subaru gave himself a satisfied smirk, the little cat tilted his head and said, "By the way—did you manage to eat the rice ball Lia made?"

"Yeah, the inside part survived. And as gross as it looked, it actually tasted good. And knowing that Emilia shaped it by hand gave it a special flavor…"

"Maybe I'll help form the rice balls next time. Think you can guess which ones I made?"

"Wouldn't that be too easy? All the furry ones would be yours."

It was a silly conversation, but it was all Puck's way of keeping Subaru calm. They had been walking uphill to rendezvous with Ram for nearly two hours—and while they had significantly risen in elevation, the forest was getting darker and darker around them. And Subaru's head swam with the sneaking suspicion that they were going the wrong way.

Just after he exhaled in exhaustion, Puck's voice on his shoulder hit his ear. "Subaru—stop."

The sensation of the spirit's breath stopped his own breathing and tensed his hands and feet. Meanwhile, an eerie noise tickled

Subaru's eardrum. His body instinctively recoiled—it was the sound of a predator hunting its prey.

Then the source of the sound slowly emerged from the bushes in front of Subaru. Its body was covered with moist, green scales, and the bloodcurdling growls came from a mouth lined with sharp fangs. But most distinctive were the two sets of red eyes shining out from the darkness.

The twin-headed snake glared at Subaru. And growing from its heads were short, white horns.

"A demon beast…impersonation done by a smart snake, maybe?"

"An amusing interpretation, but no, that's a demon beast. A two-headed snake. It's surprisingly aggressive—poisonous, too."

"A two-headed snake…but it's not quite what I imagine a two-headed snake would look like."

The demon beast before him did not have a long body with two necks growing from it. It was more simply constructed: a long body with a head on either end. It was indeed two-headed. Its name was not incorrect.

"I wouldn't call that a two-headed snake—I'd call that a double-sided snake. How does it even poop?"

"As a rule, demon beasts absorb their food and convert it to mana, so they don't defecate."

"Dang, they're just like pop idols. And they're giving a big middle finger to the food chain."

Though Subaru acted confident, his instincts were screaming as he beheld the two-headed snake before him. The demon beast was about seven feet long, about thirty feet between it and Subaru. It was a distance the demon beast could probably cross in one breath.

"I didn't ask earlier, but can you fight today, Puck?"

"He-*heh*, a demon beast like that? Easy-peasy. The only potential difficulty is, since Lia isn't here, I might not be able to chat with you anymore after I kill it."

"Since I'd rather that than be dead, by all means, kill it, Professor."

"If I must, I must. I shall live up to your expectations and—wait a minute."

While they were talking, the body and eye color of the two-headed snake changed. Dyed in attack colors, the demon beast gave a giant lurch of its body, ready to spring at Subaru—

“Fura—!”

Then, the next moment, a gust of wind slashed the snake in two. And as Subaru watched in shock, the demon beast died without uttering so much as a whimper. As the demon beast spurt blue-green blood, Subaru looked at his bag. The little cat shook its head. And then—

“Woman’s intuition strikes again.”

Ram emerged from the bushes where the demon beast had appeared and got in the punchline. After several hours apart, the girl holding a staff had been his salvation.

“Thanks, Ram…you saved me.”

“Did your map help?”

“Ah, how fleeting my joy over our reunion. Your spicy sass is glorious as always, Ram.”

With a snort at Subaru, who had flopped onto the ground in relief, Ram shut away her staff and approached the two-headed snake corpse. Then, after a thorough examination of the demon beast—

“D-dude! What’re you doing?” Subaru gasped.

“What else? I’m accomplishing our mission. Though this was exactly what I was aiming for, you sure made it easy, Barusu.”

As she spoke, Ram cut off part of the snake—the section by its front head—and ripped a sort of white crystal from it.

“It’s a pure mana crystal formed in a demon beast’s body. And this one’s much bigger than I could have hoped for.”

“So *that’s* your fourth ingredient? A venomous snake’s innards—worse than I could’ve imagined.”

As a satisfied Ram collected her ingredient, Subaru despaired that his worst fears about their quest had come true. That explained why Ram had kept her mouth shut. If Subaru had known demon beasts were on the list, he would have been more cautious—

“*Ah!* Now I know the real reason why you brought me along! You used me as demon beast bait to lure the venomous snake to me!”

“For once, you’re quick on the uptake. And thanks to you, I could secure in half a day what would have ordinarily taken me several days. You did well. Credit where credit is due.”

“You little…”

Ram’s lack of remorse beyond the pale, Subaru’s blood boiled with rage. Subaru and Ram once ventured into the forest together

to rescue Rem. So, of course, Ram knew about Subaru's particular constitution and how vulnerable he was. Yet she had taken advantage of that and pushed Subaru past the barriers to lure demon beasts to her. It was downright deceptive—

"No, wait a minute—just when did I cross over the barrier anyway?"

Noticing the preconditions were strange, Subaru looked at Puck. Carefree though he was, a spirit was still a spirit. And there was no way that the little cat spirit wouldn't have noticed they had crossed a barrier.

Puck flinched at Subaru's suspicious stare. "Mmmm, so you found out, I guess? Listen, Subaru—"

"Mighty spirit."

But Ram cut him off. Subaru noticed something was amiss, but Ram took no notice and turned to start walking.

Then she suddenly wobbled.

"Whoa, Ram!"

Hastily reaching out to grab the staggering Ram, Subaru was shocked by how hot she was to the touch when he caught her. Upon closer glance, her forehead and neck were drenched with sweat.

"It's just like that time with the Urugarum—you used up too much mana! Ram!"

"I'm fine…no big deal. Let me go."

She seemed arrogant rather than healthy. Before she could complain, Subaru scooped her into his arms. She was light as ever. And her body was still burning up.

"Lascivious."

"Just shut up and let me carry you! Hey, Puck! Put those ingredients in my pack for me! Then take me to the bolk tree. You can use my map…you know the way, don't you!"

"Well, you did discover my evil plan, after all. All right, all right, your wish is my command…"

With the disgruntled Ram in his arms, Subaru took off running behind Puck as he flew. He ran without paying attention to his surroundings, branches scraping his legs and shoulders.

Subaru's skin was covered in countless cuts as he ran. This would have happened to anybody who ran single-mindedly like that.

So it was inevitable a multitude of red marks would also cover Ram's pale skin as he cradled her in his arms.

“In other words, Ram never intended to use you as bait, Subaru. She just wanted to walk you close to the barrier to lure out any old demon beast. But then you had to go and tumble after a rice ball and cause a big scare.”

Subaru’s party returned to the mansion at suppertime as predicted. But it need not be stated that a peaceful supper was not exactly in the cards when they came home in their battered state.

“I think it’s because Ram used Clairvoyance to look for Subaru all that time—that’s what depleted her mana.”

“Well, why were you helping Ram with her plan anyway?” Subaru demanded.

“Because she asked me to. And I didn’t help her, exactly. All I agreed to do was help you if you got in a bind. Just an extension of Lia’s request. Then again, Lia’s rice ball got us in this mess in the first place, so I’m sorry about that.”

The spirit, who had pushed himself to be their navigator right up to his time limit, disappeared after he explained the truth to Subaru. Night had covered the sky outside long ago, and the spirit was sure to oversleep the next day after putting in overtime that evening. If Subaru had his way, he would have collapsed into bed that very minute, but unfortunately, since the bed closest to him already had someone sleeping soundly in it, his wish would go ungranted.

“Well, I had to get in at least one complaint to quell the anger churning in my stomach,” Subaru said, looking at Ram asleep in bed and scratching his head.

When Subaru arrived with an unconscious Ram in his arms, the mansion residents all went into a tizzy. Rem was particularly frantic, making Emilia the most reliable one in a rare turn of events. She cured Ram’s wounds, gave her a sponge bath, and put her to bed. When she questioned Subaru about what had transpired, he tactfully omitted the details about the rice ball and gave Rem the ingredients they had gathered. Now Ram’s tea could be made.

Subaru was also urged to go to bed, but he found it hard to return to his room. He wouldn’t feel better until Ram woke up and he could dump his complicated feelings on her.

And in due time, Ram’s eyes cracked open. She turned to look at Subaru seated at her bedside, and the first thing she said was—

“—Lascivious.”

“Um…just FYI, I *did* get Rem’s permission.” With a side smirk at her stereotypically sharp tongue, Subaru patted his chest and said, “As you can see, I’ve brought us safely back to the mansion. I also gave Rem the ingredients we gathered. Also, by the way, the map I made played a key role in getting us home. You can never be too prepared, as they say.”

The crude map Subaru had drawn had almost immediately come in handy. Since he had Puck take them to the easy-to-spot bolk tree then used the map to get back to the mansion, they had managed to come home in mostly a straight line. Without the map, they probably would be camping in the forest.

“Well, if we had gotten lost, Puck’s flare would have brought Rem flying to our rescue…but given what happened, I think it’s time to admit that maps are useful. Also, it’s time you trust your companions. Don’t turn them into bait without their permission.”

“…But that was the most efficient method. If you’ve got a complaint, out with it.”

“I won’t complain. Mostly because I think that would have a bigger effect on you right now, Big Sis.”

Ram’s cheek twitched ever so slightly on the pillow as she side-eyed Subaru. With a light, smug smile, Subaru relaxed into his chair in satisfaction.

“Puck filled me in on most of the details,” Subaru said. “It pissed me off, but I won’t say anything about it.”

“As a rule, most spirits are dutiful and tight-lipped…but knowing that great spirit makes me question the notion. I won’t ever rely on him again.”

“Hey, go easy on the guy. His tourist-like nature helped us out back there…” Shrugging at Ram’s contempt for Puck, Subaru stood and said, “Ah, I’d better go tell Rem you’re awake.”

“Wait, Barusu. I have a request…make that an *order*.”

“Way to kill a guy’s motivation… Anyway, what do you want?”

“There’s a white bundle in the back of that desk drawer. Use that to make a pot of tea. Make enough for both you and me.”

Subaru followed Ram’s instructions and opened the door to find a white bundle buried in the drawer. It was a tea sachet. And inside —

“Wait a minute, is this your special tea?”

“Of course, I keep a spare just in case. Now go.”

Unable to say no to her intimidating aura, Subaru wondered why he had to suffer in vain that day as he made his way to the dining hall. He boiled a pot of water and got the tea ready. He realized then that while Rem handled most of the chores, Ram had taught him how to make tea. That showed just how particular she was about tea.

"Here, Big Sis, your order of snake liver tea."

"Not snake liver. When I made this batch, it was dog intestine."

"Same difference."

For something that smelled so warm and fragrant, it had the most hideous ingredients. Subaru poured the tea into two cups and handed one to Ram, who had sat up in bed. Subaru took the other cup and sat in a chair.

It smelled quite sweet. From the aroma, you would never guess it was made from poisoned fruit seeds, powdered mushrooms, carnivorous flowers, and a crystal from a demon beast's innards—

"I know this is weird to say after I went through the trouble of brewing this, but now that I know what's in this tea, I'm not at all thirsty… For that matter, how are there *leaves* in this tea when none of the ingredients are leaves?"

"I boil the ingredients into a reduction and pair it with tea leaves to my liking. It still qualifies as tea, so relax."

And with that, Ram took a sip without hesitation. Trapped, Subaru followed suit. The hot aroma slid past his tongue and spilled out his nose. The rich tea was so palatable that it was hard to believe it contained dog intestines and various other poisons.

"Maybe we owe the good flavor not to the tea but to my improved brewing skills?"

"Don't be silly. You brewed it so horribly that all its subtle notes are lost. You made the water too hot, and you don't even pour it right."

Pelted with an onslaught of sassy hubris, Subaru drank his tea with a constrained frown on his lips. While the tea was palatable, he couldn't bring himself to like it. He still had a child's palate.

"Agh, I wish I had a cola instead. Isn't there some way we can make fizzy drinks here…"

"I've never heard of that drink. If you can find a recipe, you could ask Rem to make some."

"Nah, its ingredients are pretty fishy, just like mayonnaise—actually, more than mayonnaise."

Subaru had undergone a succession of hardships in the pursuit of replicating the flavor of his home, which was now a distant memory. It required fresh eggs, quality oil, and the right flavor balance of vinegar, salt, and pepper, as well as patience.

After several experiments with Ram and Rem, the successfully replicated mayonnaise became a staple in the Roswaal Manor kitchen. As a mayo freak, it would be no exaggeration to say that bringing mayonnaise into another world was a feat of unparalleled accomplishment to Subaru.

"Then again, I'm just your average mayo freak. Having unparalleled *isekai* knowledge is still a distant dream."

"I'm sure you're just spewing nonsense, Barusu, but I got the part where you're useless at making your dreams come true."

"I'm useless, eh? Strong words…but accurate." Subaru smiled sheepishly, because Ram was right. *Frustrating* was probably the apt word here.

And as Subaru reflected on himself, Ram narrowed her eyes and scrutinized him. Then she tilted her teacup again, wetting her lips and tongue with the liquid inside, and said, "I don't know about a taste of home…but your lack of a taste for tea is the mistake of a lifetime."

"Oh, I have a taste for tea—it just tastes like leaves."

"The inability to enjoy tea is the loss of a lifetime."

"Is that all life is to you?! *Tea?!*"

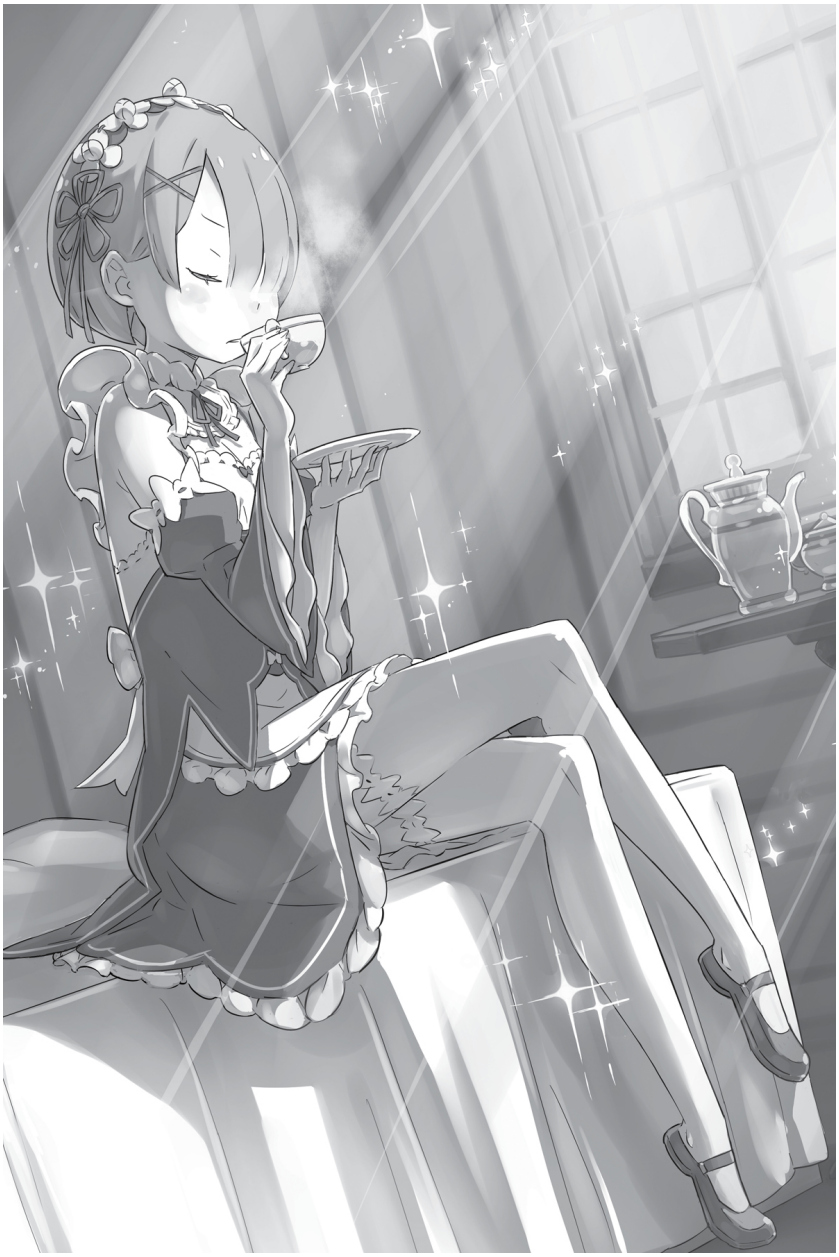
Sighing over Subaru's shocked outburst, Ram's red eyes glanced sideways at Subaru. "That's right. And since you're so pathetic, Barusu…I'll have to teach you how to brew a proper cup of tea."

With that declaration, Ram quietly brought her teacup to her lips. And as her promise to personally teach him the art of tea echoed in his mind, Subaru distinctly felt his expression grow softer.

He didn't understand why. She still hadn't even apologized for what she had put him through that day. But he got the sense that he didn't mind. Because the closeness between them felt good at that moment.

That pesky level of closeness, where they didn't quarrel, apologize, or even exchange promises of anything significant. With such a relationship, he could look forward to the opportunity to drink a tea he didn't even care for.

___That was the thought that filled Subaru's mind that evening as the tea's aroma floated in the air.



OPERATION KOKKURI

1

The air was tense in the parlor. Everyone held their breath and quietly bore witness to the scene.

Surrounding a table at the center of the room, the trio stared at each other—the sweaty-foreheaded Subaru, the brow-wrinkled Beatrice, and the ear-twitching Puck.

As the trio stared with intense concentration, Emilia and Rem watched over them with worry and confusion in their eyes. But at that moment, Subaru didn't have the mental bandwidth to put their minds at ease.

"Your face is turning green, Beako. If you push that hard, even the hollows'll wanna run for it."

"How dare you, I suppose. Who exactly is pushing too hard? I don't have the faintest reason to get worked up. Though I might ask, why are *your* nostrils flared?"

"Now, now, calm down, you two. It's just a game. Don't take it too seriously."

Beatrice had answered Subaru's provocation with a savage smile that clashed with her childlike appearance. Puck was the only one who remained his usual self, stroking his chin as he tried to ease the tension between the two.

"You aren't wrong, Puckie…but while this is technically a game, I suppose it's become a serious competition. I can't let a pathetic *human* defeat me."

"Oh dear, Betty, you're so stubborn. How about it, Subaru? Why don't you be the bigger person and let Betty have this—"

"Puck."

Subaru shot down Puck's attempt at third-party mediation. When Puck gave him a confused look, Subaru continued, "If we're talking about surrendering for harmony's sake, you'd better take that fight out of your tail first."

Silence.

"If you can't do that, you're no better than me or Beako. Am I wrong?" Subaru asked quietly.

"Dang it, Subaru, you're a real headache…" Puck folded his short arms and sighed. Then the small cat spirit penetrated Subaru head-on with his round eyes and said, "It looks like I'll have to take this seriously, too."

A wave of pressure burst from Puck with such intensity that Subaru almost fell backward. But he steeled himself and endured the gale, and with an audacious grin, he beheld his two enemies.

"How did it come to this…" Emilia murmured regretfully as she watched the winds of determination blow through the trio.

Emilia pressed a hand to her chest, her violet eyes filled with grief. Beside her, Rem softly rested a hand on her thin shoulder. When Emilia turned to look at her, Rem shook her head and said, "We can't stop them. All we can do now is to watch over them like this…"

"I'm not sure why they got like this…" Emilia lamented. "They were having such a great time until just a moment ago."

Rem sighed quietly, squeezing the words out. "It's because they each have something they can't stand to lose—"

Emilia's eyes grew round as Rem looked at the trio and nodded. "I'm sure that each one of them has something they refuse to give up. Because of this, it becomes necessary to butt heads like this now and then… At least, that's my theory."

"And that's what's making them butt heads like that?"

"I think so, yes."

Rem said nothing more, her solemn gaze fixed on the trio at the table. Observing Rem's posture, Emilia put her hands together in prayer and closed her eyes.

If possible, please bring the three a resolution that results in nobody getting hurt…

And to whom was she praying? Given the setting, if anybody, it would be—

"Thy will be done—O mighty Kokkuri."

Calling the name of the distant, unfamiliar deity, Emilia quietly offered her prayer.

At the table, the trio surrounded a white piece of paper covered in letters and numbers, with a single coin poised atop it.

The trio placed their fingers (and tail) onto the coin,

deadlocked in an eternal staring contest. As they focused on their wishes, their expressions were solemn enough to baffle even God Himself if he came down to Earth at that moment.

This story's true beginnings started with breakfast earlier that day.

2

"This is kinda random, but what are everyone's thoughts on *poltergeists* here?"

The question suddenly slipped out of Subaru's mouth at the breakfast table just after everyone had finished eating. Since all the faces of the mansion were there, in a way, meals were meaningful times during which everyone could chat. Most matters—such as giving Rem the entire day off a little while ago—originated during this time of day.

And this morning was no exception. Subaru's innocent question landed the eyes of everyone at the table on him.

"Rem, Rem, Barusu brought up something trivial again."

"Sister, Sister, that is Subaru's strength."

"*Is* it a strength, I wonder? We all know it's something bothersome or difficult."

Everyone was familiar with this banter by then. After the twins exchanged a couple of words, Beatrice sighed and added her two cents.

Then the man seated at the head of the table clapped his hands merrily and replied to the girls. "Weeell, it sounds like somebody's got another amusing idea."

With clownish makeup, a bizarre suit, an eccentric manner of speech, a quirky personality, and a sensitivity well-deviated from the norm, Roswaal L Mathers was the one-in-a-million weirdo.

"With young Subaru here giving us a novel topic of conversation every morning, there's neeeever a dull moment around here. A stagnant routine stagnates personal growth, my friends. I was taught that stagnation was one of the most cursed sins, you know."

"Uh, my question isn't as grand as you're making it sound, but just wait—I am gonna grow up big and strong."

After a verbal exchange that could have been sarcastic or

sincere, Subaru gave a panoramic look at all the faces around the table and said, “So—back to my original question. I want to talk about ghosts in general. Disclaimer: I don’t really believe in all that occult stuff, so I usually skip the summer ghost story specials on TV.”

Just to make it perfectly clear, Subaru was not afraid of ghosts in any shape or form. When it came to the occult, Subaru was surprisingly a realist who was dismissive of it. Don’t believe anything unless it’s scientifically proven—that was his mantra. It was a sentiment quite typical of today’s youth.

“I do believe in other worlds since I was summoned to one. Also, I believe in *kappas* because I saw one when I was a kid. I mean, I saw an old guy with dark green skin washing plates by a dirty river. That’s basically a *kappa*.”

“Er, I can’t speak for the, what was it, *cupper*? But…um, anyway, what exactly are you talking about, Subaru?”

So, even in another world, his firsthand eyewitness account of the *kappa* wasn’t taken seriously. Subaru’s shoulders slumped in disappointment, but beside him, Emilia got a curious look in her eyes. She pressed a finger to her cheek, gave an adorable head tilt, and said, “I’ve never heard of *a poltergeist*…is it some kind of cake?”

“*Somebody’s* excited for dessert—you really told on yourself there. Anyway, you haven’t heard of poltergeists? Dude, I guess this world’s lore just doesn’t have much metaphysical stuff in it.”

“*Poltergeists*…*kappa*…*megafiscal*…are these more words that only you know, Subaru?” Emilia asked, confused by the strange words.

“The first two aside, the last one sounds like something you’d only hear in a boardroom.”

From the confused look on Emilia’s face, Subaru deemed she didn’t have any point of reference. So he tried Rem next. “Rem, haven’t you heard of ghosts like that? Their bodies are half-transparent. At least where I come from, they wear white clothes and a triangular headpiece on their forehead as they fly around.”

“I’m sorry, Subaru, but I haven’t heard of them either…though I would be frightened if I encountered something like that.”

“I agree with Rem. An oddball who flies? Hah! If you’re pulling my leg, I’ll slap you to the ground, Barusu.”

“I’ve seen Roswaal flying around recently—how do you feel about that?” was Subaru’s retort.

“It is very precious because *ordinary* people are incapable of it. Show some respect, Barusu.”

As Ram brazenly put her master on a pedestal, Subaru wearily glanced at Roswaal. The latter shrugged and said, “Aww, don’t look at me with such hopeful sparkles in your eyes! Fine, *fine*, I’ll take you for a fly in my arms sometime. Hooow does that sound?”

“Dude, you’re so off-base—you really think I had *sparkles* in my eyes?!”

“Only joking. Besides, *poltergeist* and *kappa*…these words are unfamiliar to the people of Lugunica. As far as I know, those sorts of words are only used in the Kararagi city-states. I myself am not that knowledgeable. However, I believe I’ve heard them on occasion before.”

After Roswaal voiced his point of reference, Emilia nodded in understanding. “Oh, so they’re Kararagi words. You know, Subaru, you tend to be well-versed in the strangest trivia. So I guess it’s not all that strange that you would know these Kararagi words.”

On the one hand, Subaru was grateful to have gained Emilia’s trust, but it irked him that a strange misunderstanding had gotten her there. Still, Subaru set this feeling aside and pondered the meager reactions around the table.

In his world, poltergeists and other supernatural creatures were widely known, regardless of any individual’s belief in them actually existing. The idea that the dead become spirits had taken root in ancient history.

The dead and living, bonds and souls—Subaru understood that they were inseparable from the concept of life and death.

“Oh—is it because spirits exist here? Come to think of it, the lights of lesser spirits I see in the garden at night do seem to kinda fit the spooky vibe.”

“Wait a minute—so you’re saying they’re the same as spirits? But spirits are their own thing…aren’t they?”

Roswaal replied, “No, no, Lady Emilia, I believe what Subaru is talking about is something more along the lines of *hollows*.”

At that moment, Subaru sensed the air freezing and crackling. Emilia froze with a smile on her face when Roswaal said the word. But she wasn’t the only one who froze. It was also Rem and Ram, of course, but Beatrice too, her apathetic frown stuck on her face.

Subaru looked at the girls in shock before turning to Roswaal and asking, “Sooo…what are *hollows*?”

“In short, a hollow is formed when a deceased person has regrets or a lingering attachment to the world of the living. Unable to return to Odo Ragna, they continue to roam our world… I *suppose* that’s the best explanation.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s basically the same. Okay, so they’re just called *hollows* here.”

After hearing Roswaal’s explanation, Subaru sighed in satisfaction now that everything was clicking into place. However—while the two men were satisfied, an intense wave of emotion ran through the girls in the room. Emilia was looking particularly pale, her thin fingers trembling as she softly touched Subaru’s shoulder.

“S-Subaru, so are those strange things you mentioned really… *hollows*?”

“Sounds like it, yeah. But now it all makes sense to me. And it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“If it doesn’t matter, why did you want to talk about hollows? That doesn’t make sense. You must have some reason… Oh, I know. You’ve seen a hollow, Subaru. You saw it at the mansion. That must be why you’re suddenly interested in them. Oh geez, why did you have to bring it up so casually like that? If only I hadn’t realized what you were really talking about, I could have remained blissfully ignorant—you’re terrible, Subaru. I hate you, hate you, hate you. You’re scared of hollows, so you want to drag us all into the terror with you—!”

“Dang, Emilia-tan, that’s some paranoia you’ve got there!”

Her emotions were getting the better of her, and Emilia rambled deliriously fast and violently shook Subaru’s shoulders. And amidst his surprise, Subaru managed to gently smile at her.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be safe! And if the worst happened and I got caught up in some supernatural shenanigans, you’d be the last person to fall victim. Emilia-tan—Beako would be my first sacrifice.”

“And why are you dropping *Betty’s* name there, I wonder!”

“Are you sure? Are you sure you’re sure? Would Beatrice really be your first sacrifice?”

“How *dare* you try to sneak that in while everything is happening! Do you *both* want to be blasted out the window, I wonder?!”

“Yes, I cannot accept that,” Rem cut in. “No matter what you face, Subaru, your first sacrifice should always be me. Not Lady

Beatrice!"

"Why must I suffer such humiliation?! *Graaah*, I suppose!"

Between Emilia's uncharacteristically cruel choice, Rem's self-sacrificing offer, and Beatrice's screeching, the conversation had fallen completely off the rails.

Emilia stared at Subaru with teary eyes as the chaos relentlessly ensued and said, "Could it be…that you know a lot about hollows? That you…you know…know lots of scary stories about them? Like you do with stars?"

"Oh, not even slightly. All I know about is *Manor of the Dishes*, the story about regrets from a broken plate; or *Ghost Story of Yotsuya*, the story of betrayal, resentment, and insanity; or *Hoichi the Earless*, the story about the musician who forgot to write on his ears and got his ears ripped off…"

"Oh dear…ohdearohdearohdear…"

"*Subaruuu?* As Lady Emilia is about to faint, can we leave it at that?"

Emilia was just so cute when she was scared that Subaru couldn't help but get excited. At Roswaal's rebuke, Subaru smiled sheepishly and gently patted Emilia on the shoulder. "Just kidding, just kidding. I've never seen a hollow at this mansion, and I've only had a mysterious encounter just that once…Well, that's a lie, but it has nothing to do with hollows."

"B-but Subaru…didn't you just mention *cuppers* and *megafiscal* a minute ago?"

"The *kappa* in question was an old man with an unhealthy complexion living by the river, and metaphysical is just another word for supernatural."

Subaru gave a silent apology to his proud boyhood memory. Emilia was much more precious to him than that now.

His efforts to calm her down paid off. The turmoil gradually left Emilia's heart. Now calm, Emilia's face turned red as she said, "Listen, Subaru? I think you're misunderstanding something. I'm not at all scared of hollows. I'm just…a tad bothered by them."

"A large-sized tad?"

"No, a tad-sized tad! Ugh, I hate you, Subaru! You're so mean!"

Emilia fumed with anger, but naturally, her words were not at all convincing. Pacifying the still fuming Emilia, Subaru turned to the other girls and said, "Hey, you all froze, too—could it be that you…?"

“Could it be that I—what? I don’t understand unless your sentence has a proper subject. Your foolish ineptitude for question-asking has lost you your chance at getting an answer. The matter is closed.”

“From that candid response, it’s painfully obvious this is a sore topic for you!”

Ram cursed Subaru’s quip with a barb that was three times thornier than usual. Rem softly stepped protectively before her sister and shook her head at Subaru.

“It’s not what you think, Subaru. My sister is not scared of hollows. It’s just, fighting enemies that don’t have a physical form is confusing… I feel the same way.”

“Wait, so they bother you because you *can’t beat them up*?!”

“Fighting to protect others is also a part of my and my sister’s jobs,” Rem explained. “Don’t worry, Subaru. If a hollow did come to the mansion, I would put my life on the line to protect you.”

“Wow, that escalated quickly…”

What had started out as an innocent question quickly evolved into a solemn discussion of life-and-death situations. Unlike Emilia, who was conceptually scared, the twins’ dislike of hollows was not at all endearing.

“Okay, Beako, so I bet that frozen frown on your face is from fear. Having trouble going to the bathroom in the middle of the night?”

“Would you *please* stop treating me like a little child? I mean, there’s no way that I, *Betty*, could possibly be scared of something silly like hollows.”

“Then why are you acting so snippy about it? Something stuck in your teeth?”

“Don’t get me riled up for some nonsensical reason! If you must know…I don’t like hollows because they dim the light of the truly precious life forms, I suppose.”

“What is truly precious… Ohh, now I get it.” Subaru nodded, the reason behind Beatrice’s anger becoming clear to him. “It’s because spirits and ghosts have a similar vibe. Now I can see why you’re pissed.”

“How dare hollows—beings that don’t exist—degrade the light of all spirits? It’s infuriating.” Beatrice grumpily crossed her arms, her ego thoroughly wounded.

Earlier, Subaru thought it highly likely that people mistook

spirits for hollows. But in actual fact, Subaru was probably the only one who made the logical leap from spirits to ghosts.

Emilia's eyes shot open. "Then…was Puck a hollow all along?! And I *trusted* you!"

"You cry out, I fly out, with a meow-meow-meowww! Wait, Lia, what's wrong? Why are you crying? Who did this to you?! I'll give them a piece of my mind!"

"*You* did this to me, Puck!"

"Damn *me*, stupid, stupid, stupid Puck! —There, that good?"

Back in an uproar, Emilia proceeded to do a comedy routine with Puck in physical form. As a spirit mage, Emilia should have known better than anyone what made spirits and hollows different. It also made it possible for Emilia to be on the extreme end of the terror spectrum.

"But I'm kinda surprised everybody here doesn't like hollows," Subaru said. "Though your reasons for disliking them are all different."

"I think your conceptualization of ghosts and the like differs from the hollows we know," Roswaal explained. "At the very least, as far as we know, hollows are not well received by living beings. Animated corpses on the battlefield, evil spirits cursing the living… those are the bulk of the examples we can think of."

"Animated corpses and curses, eh? Yeah, in a world with magic, neither of those things is a laughing matter."

Subaru had real-life experience with curses, so Roswaal's examples hit a little too close to home. Subaru took another look at the uneasy faces of the girls. Not a trace of their peaceful breakfast fifteen minutes ago remained. Subaru's innocent question about hollows had smashed the mood to pieces.

If everyone left the table now, they would be left with a bad taste in their mouths. And so—

"Okay—I've got a proposal!"

Kicking off his chair to his feet, Subaru struck a pose and pointed at the ceiling. As everyone looked on in surprise, Subaru whirled his outstretched arm and said, "It seems like you all got the wrong idea, so let me explain. I didn't intend to scare you by bringing up hollows. Please, just understand that."

"So those stories about yo-chew-ya, the itchy hoes, and metafiscal…?"

"Just forget everything I said—including what sounds like a

financial buzzword. It's a big misunderstanding. They're all fiction!"

The word "fiction" brought a wave of relief to Emilia's face. While Subaru wondered if he could have handled it better, he decided he would at least take advantage of the fact that Emilia was now ready to listen to him.

"*Anyway*, they're all fiction…but I don't like the idea of this conversation ending with me just scaring you all and giving you a bad time. I mean, that would just make me a basic bad guy!"

"That ship has already sailed, I suppose," Beatrice snorted. "There's simply no way you can turn the mood around after bringing up hollows."

Subaru stuck up his thumb and loudly declared, "Allow me to remove that prejudice from your mind, Beako—with necromancy!"

Emilia tilted her head. "Neck-o-fancy?"

Smiling softly at her ignorance of the vocabulary word, Subaru repeated, "That's right, necromancy! Where I'm from, the word means 'magic that brings spirits to Earth.' And by spirits, we mean ghosts! In other words, necromancy is a ritual that summons hollows!"

Subaru's out-of-the-blue proposal brightened the complexions of everyone in the room in harmony.

"Summon hollows—is that even possible?!"

"Oh, there's a hack and trick for every problem, Emilia-tan. Even if it is just a trick, pretend I'm right and give it a go. The worst you'll be is tricked."

"Is it just me, or are you setting me up to be tricked?" Emilia muttered in bewilderment.

"But is it really all right for us to do something like this? Won't there be trouble?" Rem demanded, zooming in closer and closer to Subaru's face. "Hollows are evil beings—that's what most people believe. It's not that I don't want to trust you, Subaru, but I'm just considering the worst-case scenario…"

"Now, now, hold your horses," Subaru said. "What makes hollows and ghosts scary in the first place? *The unknown*, right? So if we can lure them to us with necromancy, we'll learn more about them, and our fears will partly wither away."

"Even if only *part* of my fears remain, we'll still be scared of them!"

"Rem…are you scared of hollows after all?"

Though Rem didn't show it in her face, she actually might have

been scared of the spooks. She walked over to Emilia and put an arm around her shaking shoulders, but this act of motherly kindness was starting to look like a desperate way to distract herself from her own fears.

"*Hmph*, so you do say meaningful things sometimes, I suppose."

"Whoa, talk about unlikely allies. Are you on my side now, Beako?" Subaru asked, surprised by her unexpected vote of confidence.

Her arms still crossed, Beatrice snorted and said, "There's a thing or two I'd like to say to hollows, given the opportunity. And if we can use this necromancy of which you speak to summon the little bastards here, then I'm game, I suppose."

Her face filled with aggressive intent, Beatrice burned with desire for necromancy. And so, knowing she genuinely wasn't opposed to the idea, Subaru turned lastly to Roswaal.

The man with the final say in the matter looked at Subaru, graciously spread his arms wide, and said, "*Very* well, then. Do as you please, I say. To be honest, if it can really summon hollows, I'm personally intrigued by this necromancy business. I would absoluuuutly love to behold it."

"That's the spirit, Rozchi! You get me, man!" Subaru was ecstatic to get permission from his understanding master. "Let's get ready to do some necromancy! And turn those frowns upside down —it's not that difficult to prepare. Just get a big piece of white paper, a quill, and a coin."

"That's incredibly cheap. I'm skeptical."

"Ease of preparation is the main selling point of instant necromancy. Where I'm from, it was a crazy popular trend for a while."

"So you played with hollows in your hometown? Everyone there must be *really* brave…"

With a vague smile at Emilia's misplaced awe, Subaru declined to elaborate. If he told Emilia about the conditions under which this brand of necromancy took off, it would only scare her again.

After all, this form of necromancy produced extreme results at times, leaving deep scars in the hearts of many boys and girls. According to rumors, it was banned as a result.

In Subaru's homeland, this ritual had a name.

"Hear ye, hear ye. I hereby declare the Roswaal Manor's first ritual…with Kokkuri!"

3

Kokkuri was a brand of necromancy that had enjoyed explosive popularity in Japan for a time. Its influence was immense, boasting an infamy so great that it was still banned in certain areas of the country.

The name *Kokkuri* was a mishmash of several Japanese mythical beasts (that roughly corresponded with foxes, dogs, and raccoons). It was typically believed that one summoned lower-level animal spirits when conducting the ritual.

In Subaru's world, the game had fallen out of practice long ago. Even so, the ritual's order of operations and the tools required were still well enough known to remain in the cultural zeitgeist.

"Kokkuri cannot speak. So, to communicate with Kokkuri, we must use *this* device."

"A pen and paper? What do we do, write letters back and forth?" Rem asked timidly, morning star in hand, as she watched Subaru spread the white paper on the table. She was dressed for battle—an unusual sight on a typical day in the mansion. In other words, Rem considered this very much an atypical combat situation. She was ready to smash Kokkuri to bits when it came out.

"Blasting it away the moment it's summoned—that's gotta be some bad karma… Sorry, but Kokkuri is invisible. Um, this pen isn't for Kokkuri to use. It's for me. See? Scribble, scribble…"

"What terrible handwriting. I can feel your lack of daily study emitting from it."

"Shut up, Big Sis. It's legible, that's all that matters."

Ignoring Ram's stronger-than-usual sass, Subaru continued to write the letters and numbers onto the paper, undaunted. In order, he wrote this world's version of the alphabet.

"Lastly, you write down numbers…and columns for *male* and *female*. And lastly, lest we forget, we draw a gate for Kokkuri to come and go through."

After writing the alphabet in perfect rows, followed by the integers one through nine, and the options *male-female* and *yes-no* at the top of the paper, all that remained was to draw a little red *torii* gate at the top, and your Kokkuri summoning paper was complete.

"Emilia-tan, a coin, please."

"Okay, just don't spend it on anything silly."

"You know, this back-and-forth makes you sound a lot like a

freeloader who gets all his money from his girl."

Ignoring Puck's almost slanderous remark, Subaru set the coin Emilia gave him on the *torii* gate at the top of the page. Then, with a nod at Emilia and Rem, the three sat at the table.

"Before we begin, here are the rules. First, each of us puts an index finger on this coin—*do not* remove your finger from the coin until we're finished. Otherwise, we'll have a big problem."

"O-okay, understood. I won't lift my finger, then… Should I freeze it?"

"No, uh, you don't need to make yourself physically incapable of moving your finger—it's more a mental focus type thing. Also, Kokkuri is a hollow who answers our questions, but it's a stickler for tradition. If we break the procedure, we'll get scolded, so please do as I say."

"We'll be scolded…" Rem pondered. "Meaning, that moment will be our opportunity to strike. I think I understand now just what it is you want from me, Subaru."

"I think you *don't* understand what I want, so I'm enacting a flat ban on violence, okay?!"

Between Emilia's nervous face and Rem's eyes filled with faint-blue bloodlust, Subaru was starting to feel uneasy. But around them also stood the fiercely antagonistic Beatrice and an increasingly battle-ready Ram. Roswaal and Puck were their usual selves, but them being their *normal selves* didn't provide much reassurance.

For a start, there was never any need to be so vigilant for the arrival of a mere Kokkuri—

"It's *because* it always flares up during the most pointless moments that a boy's sense of romance is difficult to control…"

"Save your pointless ramblings for yourself and just get on with it. Come now, quickly!" Beatrice snapped.

His cynical quip condescendingly rejected, Subaru pulled himself together and touched the coin with his index finger. Rem and Emilia followed suit until the three index fingers pressed together atop the coin.

A faint tension rising inside, the trio held their breaths—and the ritual began.

"Kokkuri…Kokkuri…answer our questions. If you're listening, please send us over to *YES*."

Like a magic incantation, Subaru recited the canned line. Upon hearing the words, Emilia and Rem pressed into the coin. But there

was no change to the coin. Glaring at the motionless coin, Subaru licked his dry lips and repeated the line.

"Kokkuri…Kokkuri…answer our questions. If you're listening, please send us over to *YES*."

But still, nothing changed.

Organically, the tense air in the room relaxed. Emilia and Rem sighed in relief, and behind them, a cynical sigh could be heard. With the stakes as high as they were, this result was bound to make even Beatrice cross.

But just when they thought it was over—

"Ah!"

Emilia yelped in shock, and speechless, Rem's eyes opened wide. Subaru, too, held his breath. The coin with their fingers on it had slowly moved toward *YES*.

Feeling the beseeching stares of his two companions on him, Subaru hastily gave the next order. "P-please return to the gate." The coin proceeded to move from *YES* back to the *torii* gate, and Subaru gained the conviction that his necromancy was a success.

It was a ritual influenced by ghosts and the collective subconscious of the participants, and they had made it over the first hurdle. From this point on, Kokkuri would show its true abilities.

"O-okay, it's with us now. So, if we ask questions, Kokkuri will answer them for the most part. Do either of you have anything you want to ask?"

"S-Subaru, won't you show us how first?" Emilia stammered.

"Yes…I think that's for the best," Rem agreed. "I still don't see any hollows."

Emilia was sincerely scared, while Rem still mistook the ritual's purpose as an ambush for the ghost. Since they revoked their question-asking privileges, Subaru thought for a moment, then asked:

"Kokkuri, I have a question for you—is Emilia scared of hollows?"

"Subaru?!"

Emilia gave an accusing shriek—but the coin was already moving. The coin slid onto *YES*, making Emilia's feelings—already obvious though they were—clear.

"Thank you, Kokkuri. You may return to the gate."

Satisfied with the results, Subaru gave the command to return home, and the coin slid gracefully to the *torii* gate. That was how a

session of Kokkuri usually flowed.

"So there you have it—those are the basics of Kokkuri. All we have to do now is ask Kokkuri more questions so it won't get offended… Emilia-tan, why are you giving me that look?"

"I-I'm not scared, I swear! I think that last answer was a mistake. I'm sure you moved the coin yourself, Subaru. You can't fool me!"

NO

"Hyeep?!"

Kokkuri mercilessly smashed Emilia's cute little attempt at obstinance to pieces. Shrieking and recoiling from the rebuke, Emilia quietly croaked, "I'm sorry…"

And then, the previously passive Rem hurled a question at Kokkuri with a shockingly out-of-character bravado: "Almighty Kokkuri—what's for supper tonight, meat or fish?"

M E A T

When Kokkuri slid along the letters to answer what was for supper, Rem thanked it, then looked up at Subaru and Emilia. "I do believe Almighty Kokkuri's answers are credible. There isn't any fish in the kitchen groceries, so we're having a meat dish tonight for supper…and I was the only person who knew that before this moment."

"Uh…wait, doesn't this mean this ritual is kind of incredible?" Grasping the intention behind Rem's comment, Emilia's free hand flew to her open mouth in shock. Her violet eyes fluttered, then she stared at the coin and said, "Kokkuri is incredible. I'm utterly shocked."

T H A N K Y O U

"I'm sorry I ever doubted you. And you're being *really* polite with us, too."

I T H A P P E N S

"Really? Does it often happen to you? But…being misunderstood must make you feel very sad, so I really am sorry. I'll be more careful."

I T S A L L G O O D

"Was Kokkuri always this casual?!" Subaru snapped.

Kokkuri's response to Emilia's gracious remorse seemed oddly sloppy.

Meanwhile, the coin slid freely over the paper, painting the mundane conversation into a rather bizarre tableau.

That being said, Emilia seemed to trust Kokkuri now. The fear in her eyes over hollows was gone. And seeing the heartwarming cultural exchange unfold before her, the war drums in Rem's eyes had seemed to quell.

"Lady Emilia, may I speak with Almighty Kokkuri next?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Kokkuri, will you speak with Rem now?"

S U R E

"Wow, it spelled out *SURE* instead of just moving to *YES*!"

Kokkuri was no longer the ritual's guest of honor—it was the fourth participant.

It was all quite different from what Subaru had imagined based on rumor, but perhaps this is just how the Kokkuri of this world was—a far cry from the nasty rumors of Japan's Kokkuri.

"Is Subaru satisfied by the meals I prepare every day?" Rem asked.

H E L I K E S T H E M

"Does Subaru enjoy his daily chores at the mansion? Does he feel fatigued?"

A G O O D F A T I G U E

"Do Subaru and my big sister get along?"

T H E O P P O S I T E O F H A T E I S I N D I F F E R E N C E

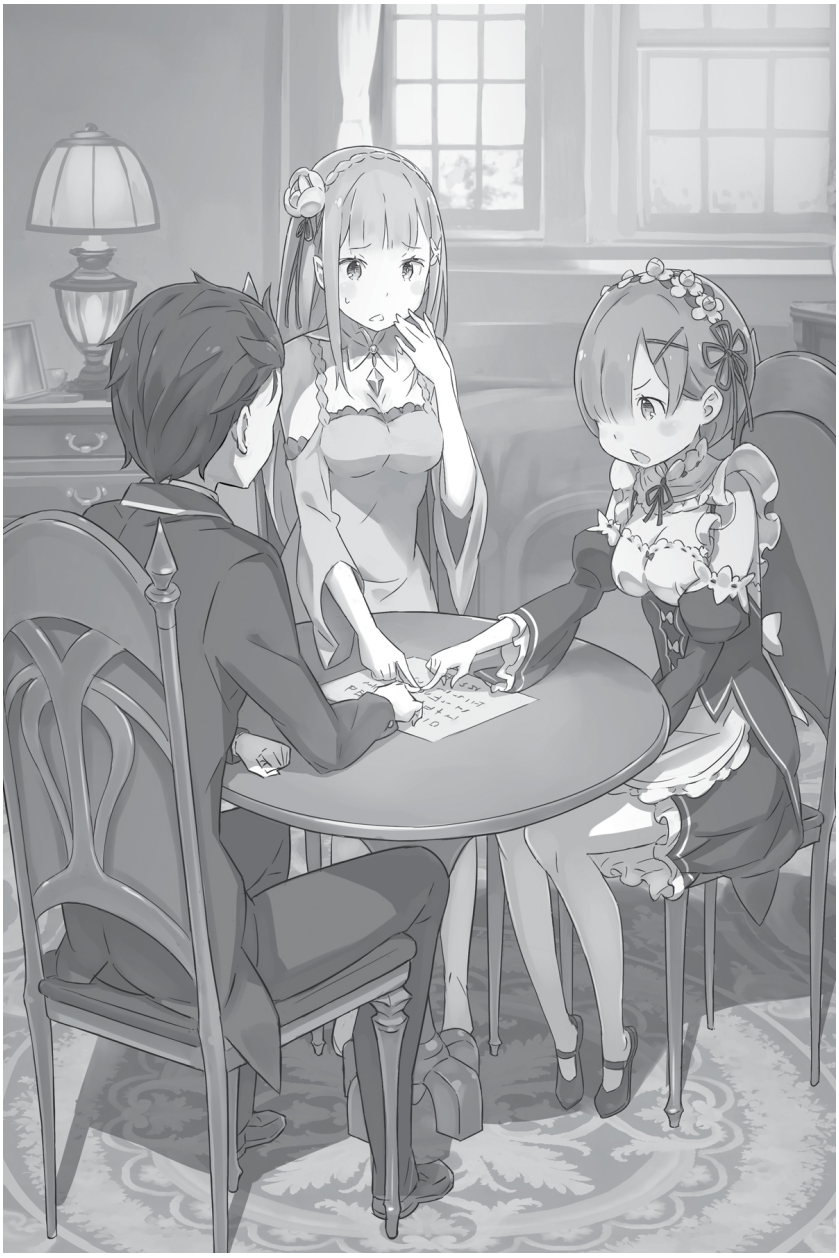
"Does Subaru—"

"Excuse me, Rem? You don't have to ask Kokkuri. I'm right here."

"Um, but I'm too shy to ask you directly…"

"Yeah, but this format is about as direct as you can get while technically still being indirect!"

He didn't get what was embarrassing Rem, but Kokkuri was every bit as friendly as Rem was shy. However, Rem's curiosity appeared to be sated for the moment, so the matter was closed for the time being.



“Okay, I’m reluctant to do this, but let’s say good-bye. Kokkuri, thank you very much. You may go now.”

“Thank you very much. I’d love to chat later.”

“I pray that your journey home is safe and uneventful.”

Subaru stuck to tradition, while Emilia and Rem gave Kokkuri an incredibly fervent farewell. The coin headed for the *torii* gate as they said their good-byes and the former tension in the room melted away—everyone knew then that Kokkuri was home.

“So that’s how it works. What’d y’all think? Kokkuri wasn’t a scary hollow, right?”

“To my shock, no, it wasn’t,” Emilia said. “I couldn’t see it—but I know it was really there. Maybe it’s a spirit…but it didn’t feel like a spirit…”

“As far as *I* could seeee, there was no mana activity. It was quite mysterious, but I dooo get the sense that I just bore witness to the wonders of necromancy.”

Once the ritual was over, Roswaal broke his silence and nodded in admiration. Receiving the top magic user’s seal of approval, Subaru felt a personal sense of pride for Kokkuri.

“That was definitely not the work of a spirit,” Puck agreed. “If it had been, Lia and I would’ve noticed. What did you feel, Betty?”

With a quiet, resentful voice, Beatrice answered, “I still don’t approve. A hollow’s very existence is blasphemy toward spirits.”

Puck’s eyes widened. “Betty?”

Ignoring him, Beatrice shuffled over to the table and said, “Younger twin—I’m taking your spot. I’ll have to expose this farce for what it is, I suppose.”

“Hey now, Beatrice, that was uncalled for,” Emilia protested. “There wasn’t a bit of hoodwinking at this table.”

“Hoodwinking—you don’t hear that word much nowadays…” Subaru murmured. “But anyway, are you saying you doubt Kokkuri? Then how do you explain what just happened?”

“I’ll ask the questions here. Unless you’re afraid of me exposing the truth, I wonder? Well, too bad.”

“Now I’m really miffed… You’ll be sorry, drill loli.”

Rem surrendered her seat to Beatrice, and Subaru sat back down in his chair. Beatrice glared at Emilia and said, “Might you switch out too, I wonder? My efforts would be pointless if too many

Kokkuri cultists were at the table. Allow Betty and Brother to brilliantly expose the blasphemy."

Subaru rolled his eyes. "'Kokkuri cultists'? That's a leap. And how would Puck even participate?"

"Could I use my tail?"

"Agh, fine, whatever. Use your tail."

Puck flew over the table and stretched his long tail to the coin. Beatrice and Subaru touched the coin, and the unorthodox setup was complete.

"Subaru…"

"Don't worry, Emilia-tan. Just you watch. I'll protect Kokkuri __"

"Okay. I trust you."

Emilia clasped her hands in front of her chest in prayer and nodded at Subaru. With a nod back, Subaru took a deep breath and poured his concentration into the *torii* gate on the paper.

"Kokkuri…Kokkuri…sorry to bother you again, but if you're listening, please send us over to *YES*—whoa, that was quick."

P E S K Y

"I know, I don't blame you for getting angry—we summoned you right after we sent you home. Sorry about that."

The grumpiness somehow communicated from the letters on the page made Subaru bow his head to the table in shame. But the two Kokkuri newcomers widened their eyes in shock.

"At the very least, I didn't move it," Puck said. "What about you, Betty?"

"No…I wouldn't do something so shameful. Fine. I'll pretend you really are there and tear your reputation to shreds, I suppose."

F O R S H A M E

"Kokkuri sassed you, Beako."

"*Grraaa*, indeed!"

Anyway, for now, Team Kokkuri got one point. No longer angry over being summoned again so quickly, Kokkuri moved to the letters *F I R E A W A Y* to indicate it was awaiting their questions. The coin swirled atop the paper, showing that Kokkuri was losing patience.

"Come on, Beako, ask a question. Go kick its ass."

"Kokkuri, how do we get rid of you?"

"*Why* do you have to throw a wet blanket on everything?! The only person you're allowed to ask that question to: *Clippy*! Stupid

virtual assistant—*nobody* asked you for help!"

H O W D O I G E T R I D O F Y O U ?

"And dang, Kokkuri is a sadist for Beako!"

Just when Beatrice thought she had the upper hand, Kokkuri issued a dramatic clapback. Even Kokkuri saw through Beatrice for the punching bag character she was.

"Okay, how does Lia feel about me?" Puck asked.

H A N D F U L O F A D A D

O R M O M

"Hee-hee, this's fun," Puck giggled. "Okay, how do I feel about Lia?"

H A N D F U L O F A D A U G H T E R

O R M O M

"Wait, you're both mother figures to each other sometimes?" Subaru snorted.

Puck smiled vaguely while Emilia vehemently shook her head in denial. It was an unconventional parent-child relationship, but Kokkuri's perception was astute.

"H-hmph! Well, how does my brother feel about Betty, I wonder?"

P O L I T E

"Huh? What's *polite* supposed to mean? He thinks of me as polite?"

A S K P O L I T E L Y

"*Why* has this pesky hollow been uniquely rotten to *me*, I wonder?!"

Either out of utter exasperation (or amusement), Kokkuri was quite hard on Beatrice. After a barrage of evaded questions, the formerly furious little girl was thoroughly disheartened.

Regardless, Beatrice could no longer deny Kokkuri's existence with their feud having progressed this far. So, in a way, it was mission accomplished. This meant it was time to send Kokkuri home—

"Oh, Subaru, might I ask one final question?"

"Hm? Oh, Rem, you've still got a question?"

Her hand still raised, Rem answered that she did, which baffled Subaru for a moment. As a rule, the only people who could ask Kokkuri questions were the participants at the table. Kokkuri didn't seem bothered by it, though.

F I R E A W A Y

“Dang, Kokkuri, how gracious of you. Okay, Rem, ask your question.”

“Thank you very much. So I’ve noticed recently that the mayonnaise we keep in the kitchen seems to have depleted overnight. What is the cause of that?”

The moment Rem’s innocent question was hurled at the table, the coin that held Kokkuri—which once slid freely along the table—went completely motionless. The coin stayed at the *torii* gate, gave a slight quiver beneath their fingers, and then moved no more.

The three participants held their breaths and stared at each other. The sight was very confusing for Emilia and Rem.

——This brings us to where our story began.

4

Imbuing the coin with the full strength of their bodies, the trio solemnly watched the table to see what would come to pass. Through the cold sensation in their finger (and tail) tips, it was clear that a presence was eager to push the coin toward the correct answer. But this time, there was no way the correct answer could be reached.

The mayonnaise kept at Roswaal Manor was a replica of the ultimate mayo-lover Subaru’s description, which Rem made every day with great care. And that mayonnaise was nibbled at each and every night by *somebody*—okay, by Subaru. Unable to control himself, he would sometimes sneak into the kitchen at night and snack on some of it. But he could not let his nightly escapades be revealed.

“Your shoulders are stiff, Beako. You too, Puck. What’s that muscle bump I see in your tail?”

“Well, why are your cheeks so tense? Your already hideous sneer has gotten even worse, I suppose. I’m sure even this Kokkuri fellow is cringing at the sight of it.”

“Come on, you two, we still have a chance to talk this out. Let’s be healthy and have a conversation about it like adults. I know, wanna go on a picnic?”

They all kept each other in check, but the coin still showed no signs of moving. Subaru was pressing into the coin to prevent Kokkuri from revealing the truth, and the other two were

desperately trying to break his defenses. If things stayed like this much longer, he would be branded a mayo thief—

"Oh! The coin…!"

Emilia broke her vigilant silence with a shaky yelp, her eyes intensely following the coin as it began to move. But the coin was moving slowly and with such weight that it threatened to rip the paper beneath it. The coin slowly glided over the letters *B E A T*—naturally, Subaru was the one moving it.

Before he was unmasked, he would make somebody else take the fall to clear his name. It was the only way.

"Whoa there! Gee, I wonder who the culprit is?" he lied brazenly.

"Th-this isn't funny! Come on, take a closer look…!" Beatrice protested, her hand glowing brightly. The next thing they knew, a gust of wind whirled around the little girl, and Subaru noticed she was putting more force into the coin.

"Beako, don't, you *wouldn't*…!"

"See? Take a closer look. It's clearly spelling out your name…"

As Beatrice said, the coin changed course, going not to *R* but to *S*, then *U*, *B*, and *A*. She was clearly using magic to spite him.

"B-e-a-t-s-u-b-a?" Emilia's face twisted in confusion as she sounded the letters out loud. But Subaru was in hot water now. In just two more letters, his name would be revealed, and his crime would be exposed.

"But this was where Kokkuri's ash-colored cells flamed to even greater heights!" Subaru narrated.

"Y-you wouldn't *dare*…!" Beatrice snarled.

With the coin hanging dangerously close to *R*, he somehow managed to swing it onto *P* and then *U*. He only had two more letters to go, and he was scot-free.

"B-e-a-t-s-u-b-a-p-u?"

"Okay, Kokkuri! Take us to the finish line, baby!"

"Not if I can help it, Subaru!" Puck sneered. "You let your guard down—now it's Counter-Kokkuri time!"

"I'll help you, Puckie! Together, we are the Kokkuri Comrades!"

Pushing into the opening in Subaru's hasty attack, Puck slid the coin back to the letter *S*. Beatrice rode on his momentum, pushing Subaru into defense.

He was going to lose—or so he thought.

E N O U G H

The coin, previously held captive under the trio's powerful pushing, spun backward with tremendous speed, sending Subaru, Beatrice, and Puck away from the table. The coin, freed from their grasp, raged on the paper, shooting over the letters to scold the trio for mocking it.

YOUR PETTY FEUD IS MAKING SOMEBODY SAD.

"M-making who sad…?"

EMILIA.

Astonished by Kokkuri's answer, Subaru turned around. And there stood Emilia, her sad eyes beholding the three of them. Her hands were clasped at her chest like she was in prayer the whole time. She was in despair over the three for pushing the blame on each other—and Kokkuri had noticed.

REMEMBER WHAT MATTERS MOST. COMPASSION, KINDNESS, AND LOVE.

"K-Kokkuri, you're really…"

MY WORK HERE IS DONE. EVERYTHING THAT FOLLOWS IS YOUR STORY TO WRITE.

Kokkuri's kindness left Subaru speechless. Leaving those final words on the group, Kokkuri returned to the *torii* gate. Too quickly to be stopped. And the air in the room—transformed.

"Almighty Kokkuri…has returned home, it would seem." Rem put into words the truth everyone already knew: The presence was gone. She touched the paper left behind on the table, laying her hand down on the *torii* gate and coin. "I'm so sorry. My careless question angered the Almighty Kokkuri."

"N-no, Rem, um, you did nothing wrong," Subaru stammered. "It was my fault for treating Kokkuri like some cheap party trick in the first place. I was really rude to Kokkuri, too."

He was surprised by Kokkuri's excessive friendliness, but that made him feel all the more ashamed. And so there was only one way he could best atone for his wrongdoing.

"Rem, about the mayonnaise—"

"Yes, it is a shame that we never found out who the culprit was…"

"Um, no, I didn't mean that. The culprit was…"

Staring straight into Rem's eyes, Subaru bowed his head in remorse. And then—

"I did it."

"It was me."

“I gave into temptation, I suppose.”

When the three voices overlapped, Rem widened her eyes.

“Excuse me?”

But most surprised of all were Subaru, Puck, and Beatrice. They exchanged looks, their mouths gaping. And seeing this, Emilia pinched the coin—

“Kokkuri, Kokkuri—did you know all along?”

With a faint smile on her face, she asked her question to the silent coin.

5

Leaving the parlor of repentant mayonnaise thieves behind them, Ram called out to Roswaal in front of her.

“What a ridiculous farce—don’t you agree, Master Roswaal?”

His shoulders shook with laughter as he replied, “I think it was a raaather entertaining performance, don’t you? Subaru truly is a card. And he kept me captivated to the very end—I am pleased.”

“I wouldn’t stroke Barusu’s ego if I were you. He’ll do something even more outrageous.”

“And I would welcome that—does that make you angry, Ram? *Hmmm?*”

Unable to object to her master’s cheer, Ram sighed quietly to herself. She was never able to oppose anything Roswaal said. Pouring her entire being into her master’s wishes *was* her way of showing her loving devotion. And so—

“That coin…how did you move it, Master?”

“A combination of wind and earth magic. I used the wind to scatter my mana beyond detection and localized vibrations to move the coin. Beatrice and the great spirit both opted to ignore it.”

Roswaal’s remorseless answer brought his two accomplices into Ram’s mind. They were an interesting pair. The cat spirit’s participation was cheerful, while the girl’s was begrudging.

“Still, I sensed an anomaly in that final exchange,” Ram said. “I find it hard to believe that Lady Beatrice *and* the great spirit would both dig their own graves.”

“Well, the unpredicted occurred. After all, that last exchange is also beyond my comprehension.”

“Huh?”

“What I’m saying is that not *all* of this was my little game.

There was no interference with my mana then either. Now, that begs the question: What *did* young Subaru summon? *Hmmm?*"

Roswaal winked at the bewildered Ram. He was either joking or sincerely enjoying an actual mystery, but Ram couldn't tell which. She hoped that it was all nonsense on Roswaal's part—but on the off chance that wasn't the case…

"That ritual…let's ban it at the mansion from now on. Yes."

Bowing deeply, Ram's heart firmly made the decision.

Thus, the imported Kokkuri was deemed taboo—just as it was in the world from which it came—and it was never used again at Roswaal Manor.

Instead of a ghost, an angel would be summoned…but that's a story for another time.

LIBRARIAN BEATRICE'S RELUCTANT PROMISE

1

She held her breath and opened the door, looking left and right down the hall.

She strained her ears but heard nobody approaching. With a satisfied clench of her tiny fist, the girl stepped onto the red carpet —and began to run.

The soft carpet absorbed her footsteps but not her worries. Not only the sound of her footsteps but also the sound of her breath was an unwelcome enemy to her now.

As she passed the rows of guestroom doors, she ran the long distance to the end of the hall, dodging the furnishings as she went. Her eyes darted to and fro, looking for a place to hide, when—

"Boo!"

A little boy leaped out from behind a pot straight in front of her. His arms were spread wide on either side of his head, and his mouth was agape, with snot dripping from his nose.

Gritting her teeth, she forced the mana back inside her before it burst out. She narrowly avoided blasting that little boy into oblivion. She gave a grateful sigh to her self-control and the boy's devilish good luck.

And then—

"Take that, I suppose!"

"Yargh!"

She slapped the silly-faced little boy's ear with her now mana-less hand. The boy let out a yelp and tumbled to the floor. She patted her sausage curls and said, "Hmph! Serves you right for scaring Betty. This isn't child's play!"

"Ahhh! Found you!"

"Ooh, there he is! She got Luca good!"

"But even if you stop Luca, there's a second and third Luca to replace him!"

“Ack, indeed.”

Just when she thought she had won, the detached force appeared noisily and ran over to her from the opposite end of the hallway. Clicking her tongue at the loud voices, she touched a nearby door to use the Passage—

“Don’t think you’ve won.”

With a yank of her hand and a shake of her head, the girl ran from the opposite end of the hallway, stopping halfway to kick the slapped boy in the shin. He yowled in pain, followed shortly by the cries of his comrades.

“Go! Catch her!”

“Go! Get her!”

“Go! Strip her down!”

As cries of the friends of the boy she stepped on rang out from behind her, the girl ran through the map of the mansion in her mind. Then she looked over her shoulder, glared at the boys, and said, “I swear, I won’t let you little brats have your way.”

Her voice filled with determination, and her skirt gripped firmly in her fists—Beatrice ran at full speed.

2

Looking over the library, buried deep in shelves of books, Subaru sat on the floor and asked a question.

“Y’know, Beako, don’t you get unhealthy, holing yourself up in here all the time?”

The spacious room was shrouded in an ancient, solemn aura. There were no windows, and the only light came from a few magic lanterns set here and there. The white ironstones in glass vessels glimmered with light, fulfilling the task of illumination.

But the light had a narrow range and hardly lit everything in the shelf-lined room.

“Reading in dim light makes your eyes go bad, and since there are no windows, this room has poor ventilation, too. It’s bad for your lungs, sitting in a room without fresh air.”

“*Why* won’t you shut up, I wonder? What I do and where I do it is my own business… Besides, the air in the Archive of Forbidden Books is self-cleansing—it’s the epitome of *pure*.”

“For real? Mana rocks. So that’s why this room feels so cozy—I was confused about that. I thought a room filled with Beako’s CO_2

would surely be a relaxing place."

"I don't understand what you're saying, but it's something very unsettling, I suppose!"

Unable to stand the idle chitchat any longer, Beatrice raised her voice from her stepladder. With a red face, she thrust a pointer finger at the boy sitting brazenly in the middle of the room and said, "*Why* do you come here day in and day out to bother me?! This isn't a place for you to kill time. It is the sacred, inviolable Archive of Forbidden Books."

"You say it's 'forbidden,' but that's not very convincing when it's so easy to get into."

"I don't want you to come in. You just come barging in all the same!"

Beatrice always erupted at Subaru when he unceremoniously entered her library—and today was no exception. She jumped off her stepladder, marched up to Subaru, and stared menacingly down at him as he sat cross-legged on the floor. Her elaborate curls springing at the sides of her face hypnotized Subaru.

"No matter how much I use my Passage, you always find me like it's nothing… Never before has anybody defiled my Archive like you."

"Boinnng, boinnnng."

"*What* about my face is so amusing, I wonder?! Listen to me!"

"Whoa there!"

Subaru quickly caught the unfinished book Beatrice hurled at him in an uncontrolled rage. Her face was still red, and Beatrice turned her giant eyes on Subaru in a menacing glare. She bore such an uncanny resemblance to an angry, yipping chihuahua that Subaru let a chuckle escape him.

"What's so funny… Could you possibly turn my stomach anymore, I wonder."

"Sorry, my bad. But y'know, you really shouldn't throw books on the ground when you finish them. Put them back on the shelf. If you pass on tidying up now, the floor'll be buried in books before you know it."

"You dare lecture Betty, this Archive's librarian, on the proper handling of *books*? Try again, child."

"But I just saw the aforementioned librarian throwing a book on the ground…"

For someone who took so much pride in being a librarian, she

wasn't especially careful with her books. Taking the book from Subaru's extended hand, Beatrice shoved it onto the shelf beside her. The titles of the books on the shelf were all mismatched—she was totally winging it.

"Hey, where's your librarian's pride now? If you just shove the books anywhere, you'll regret it later when you want to binge-read the series. One of my two-volume series became a standalone book once because of that."

"That was an oddly personalized warning, but I don't need your help. The Archive of Forbidden Books is a revolutionary place far beyond *your* understanding."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you put a book on a shelf, it's automatically returned to where it belongs, I suppose."

"The Archive is awesome! Scratch that, it's *creepy*!"

He felt bad about knocking Beatrice off her cloud, but Subaru genuinely felt more disgusted than in awe. He looked at the shelf Beatrice returned the book to and said, "Whoa, for real? Do the books really go back on their own? That's hella convenient, but it'd be terrifying to see it actually happen—wait a minute, why do we even need a librarian? Why are you even here?"

"*You* can't seem to hold a conversation without *belittling* me, I suppose…"

Even though Subaru had asked the question in earnest for once, Beatrice still took it as one of his usual quips. She slipped past him and pulled a book from a nearby shelf. The Archive of Forbidden Books contained many thick tomes, so the sight of the small child carrying it evoked a sense of danger.

That being said, he still reached out to help and—

"I don't need your help," she snapped sourly.

With a smirk on his face, Subaru said, "Well then…I guess I'll be on my way."

Sitting atop the stepladder, Beatrice opened the book in her lap and fell into reading mode. Once in this state, Beatrice's tolerance for conversation got noticeably worse. And Subaru had good enough manners to know not to bother someone when they were reading. This gave him the perfect opportunity to retreat.

As Subaru headed for the exit of the Archive, Beatrice said nothing. But before he left the girl who was anything but kind to him, Subaru suddenly remembered something. He turned around

and said, “By the way, have you heard the news, Beako? For two days starting tomorrow, Roswaal and Ram will be away.”

“Yes, I heard…but it doesn’t concern me, I suppose.”

Even his attempt at gossip got a surly response from Beatrice. This didn’t sit right with Subaru. Tilting his head, he said, “But it *does* concern you. The master of the house and his—well, I can’t exactly find the right word to express their relationship—but why don’t you see them off? Rozchi might jump for joy.”

“I can’t even imagine Roswaal jumping for joy. And for the last time, it doesn’t concern me. Say good-bye at the door? That’s so—” Beatrice cut off there, her eyes on her book.

A sudden silence fell on the Archive, robbing Subaru of the right moment to escape. The sound of her turning pages also stopped, filling the room with an unsettling eeriness.

Subaru retraced his steps, wondering what could have possibly set her off. He wasn’t thinking that hard when he said what he did. But he was aware that he had said something intrusive about Beatrice’s and Roswaal’s relationship. Even so—

“Good-bye, Subaru.”

The sudden voice in the back of his memory grabbed Subaru’s heart. The voice he had tried so hard not to think about…not to remember…was ringing in his brain.

The gentle voice was calling out to him from behind, bidding him what he didn’t realize at the time was a final farewell. Subaru couldn’t remember how he had answered the all-too-familiar voice that day.

“No—you really should make an appearance tomorrow to say good-bye.”

When Subaru’s murmured voice broke the silence, Beatrice sighed into her book. Without lifting her face, her eyes glared up at Subaru.

“For the *third* time. It *doesn’t* concern me.”

“C’mon, you’ve got nothing to lose. It’s not like you’ve got anything better to do—you’ll just be holed up in here anyway. So why not at least make an appearance—”

“Enough already,” Beatrice snapped, stopping Subaru in his tracks. “Haven’t you considered there’s a reason I’m in here? There is no ‘anyway’ about it. If you insist I go, you’ll just have to drag me, I suppose.”

Subaru stayed silent.

“Though when we’re in this room, there is no way you could possibly gain the upper hand.”

In Beatrice’s voice, there was a quiet yet firm stubbornness. It was a rage sleeping deep within her that didn’t usually come out during her little daily spats with Subaru. If that rage awoke, he would burn in a sea of fire. Realizing this, Subaru raised the white flag.

“Understood… Sorry, I rambled. Good night.”

When he obediently backed off, the pressure emitting from Beatrice disappeared. And as he walked out of the room, she said nothing else.

“Ugh, that pigheaded bookworm.”

The moment he closed the door, he could tell somehow that the planes had shifted. He opened the door just to be sure and found that the door that once connected to the Archive now led to an empty guest room.

Beatrice’s Passage was a dimensional magic that connected the Archive of Forbidden Books to any door in the mansion that suited her. And since door-selection rights belonged only to Beatrice, getting in touch with her was quite difficult. However, with his lucky guesswork, Subaru was immune to her special ability for some reason.

“Still, why was Beako acting like that…?”

“Oh—Subaru? What are you doing out here?”

As Subaru frowned and pondered over the strangeness he felt at the end of his conversation with Beatrice, someone called out to him. He turned just in time to see Emilia descending the stairs, her silver hair tied back.

She approached Subaru in the hallway, smiled faintly, and gave him a curious look. “You’re headed to my room, you know. But you already wished me a good night.”

“Uhh—just passing by. Fresh from the bath, Emilia-tan? Looking cute.”

“Sure, sure.” Emilia waved Subaru’s incoherent praise aside (she was used to it by then).

But there was a distinct red flush on Emilia’s cheeks and neck as she smiled sheepishly and a dewy lustrousness in her long silvery hair. Sharing the same roof with the girl of one’s dreams was a special blessing for boys like Subaru.

“Subaru, why are you smirking? Do I look strange?”

“No, if anybody’s strange, it’s me. Your beauty throws me off my game… Oops, there I go again. No, wait a minute, this is actually great timing.”

Setting aside his quips and flirtations, Subaru got closer to the perplexed Emilia. She smelled wonderful—but that wasn’t what he wanted to talk about.

“As appealing as standing in the hallway talking to you is, I’ve got a little favor to ask. I know it’s late, but can I borrow Puck?”

“You want to borrow Puck?” A finger to her cheek and her eyes round from the sudden question, Emilia said, “He’s already asleep, but he ought to come right out if I call him. What do you need Puck for—oh, I think I know. You’re lonely and don’t want to sleep alone.”

“If that’s where your mind went, doesn’t that make me the biggest loser in the universe? No, no, actually, I wanted to talk to him about Beako. It would be a big help if I could talk to you, too.”

“About Beatrice?”

Emilia’s eyes grew even rounder. Subaru shot her a teasing smile. It was the smile of a little brat planning a special prank.

“I wanna teach that little shut-in a lesson.”

3

The next day, it wasn’t until the afternoon that Subaru popped into the Archive of Forbidden Books. As usual, Beatrice sat on her stepladder and didn’t offer him a welcoming greeting. And given the events of the day before, the way she hid her face behind her book gave her an even more menacing aura than usual.

“’Sup, Beako. Rozchi and Ram left. And since you weren’t there to say good-bye, he cried so hard his clown makeup melted.”

“In that case, I’m glad I didn’t go to say good-bye. Now, if you’ve only come here to have a pointless conversation, you should leave, I suppose.”

Beatrice waved her hand as if she were shooing a fly. At the end of his rope, Subaru scratched his head for a while…until he arrived at an idea and nodded.

“Hey, Beako, let’s pick up where we left off yesterday. Okay? Good. Thanks.”

“You self-indulgent fool! You don’t speak for me!”

“Nah, I’mma go ahead and max out my self-indulgence credits

on you. So. Revisiting yesterday's conversation, if you won't send him off, how about welcoming him home?"

"This is not up for debate. I don't want to. End of story. *Why* are you so obsessed with this to begin with, I wonder?"

"Why? Well, because it's important." Subaru crossed his arms and nodded.

Ever since the debate began the night before, Subaru had repeatedly asked himself what he should do. And the answer he arrived at—was a bit tricky to put into words.

"I know it seems like I'm blowing this out of proportion, but there are some things you just *need* to say when the moment comes. Otherwise, you might regret it later. You'll be like, *Ahhh, I blew it!* Doesn't that happen to you?"

"No…I don't suppose I've experienced that."

Beatrice avoided his gaze, flatly rejecting Subaru's assertion. Sensing from her reaction that he had chinked away at her armor a little, Subaru gave another push.

"Well, of course, you haven't experienced it—you're a shut-in homebody! A hopeless loser!"

"Stop—I don't know what that means, but hearing you say it churns my stomach. I get the sense that you are unfairly judging my very existence."

Subaru pointed a finger at her. "If you were offended by the words alone, that proves deep down, you know I'm right."

"How many times must I tell you—I don't understand that word!" With a tired frown, Beatrice slid her fingers into her curls and bounced them like springs. "I'm not understanding what you're trying to say, I suppose. Just spit it out and get the hell out of my Archive."

"Hey, Beako…wanna make a bet with me?"

"A bet?"

"That's right, a bet. A little friendly competition."

Beatrice frowned in confusion at the sudden strange proposal. She scrutinized Subaru dubiously, then said, "A bet…what a crazy idea. I have no logical reason to agree to it."

"If you choose to do or not do things solely based on logic, you'll grow up to be a really boring adult. Though being a super chaotic adult like Roswaal isn't so much better."

"That's one thing you and I can agree on, I suppose."

Their opinions on the absent master of the house were united.

But setting aside the eccentric stepping stone that gave them common ground, Subaru held up a finger and said, “So that’s why you and I should make a little wager to have some fun—keep you from growing up into a boring adult. Playing with fire and getting away with it is a privilege that people like you and I can only enjoy when we’re kids.”

“So let’s say you and I did make this bet…what would I gain from winning?”

“You’re a shrewd one. Since you’re interested in the prize, does that mean you’re game?”

Beatrice frowned and said nothing. But her silence was his gain. Subaru turned to face the girl, and he extended his right hand. As Beatrice stared at it dubiously, Subaru said—

“I cry out, and you fly out—”

“With a meow-meow-meowww!”

With a boisterous response to Subaru’s call, particles of light gathered in Subaru’s hand. The light immediately took the shape of a small cat as the palm-sized cat Puck jumped onto Beatrice’s hand.

Puck washed his face, his beady black eyes brimming with mischief as he said, “Lia requested it, and I’m helping out because I agree with it, but…Subaru? I’m surprised how roughly you handle cats.”

“Well, there’s a saying in my homeland about needing a cat’s help when you’ve got your hands full—and this cat just happens to be helpful in so many ways.”

Subaru did come to Puck for help comparatively often, both for his usefulness and amicability. And he wound up asking for Puck’s help this time, too. And the result—

“Aww… Oh, Puckie, you’re so cute and fluffy—you’re Betty’s ideal, I suppose.”

As expected, Beatrice melted when she caught Puck in her hand. As she girlishly blushed over the little kitty, Subaru smirked and said, “You’re so predictable you’re almost a walking cliché, but if you win the bet, you’ll win Puck Petting Privileges for a day. I’ve already gotten both his and his guardian’s permission.”

“To clarify, *I* am *Lia’s* guardian. Don’t get that wrong,” Puck demanded, his tail standing straight.

That aside, Beatrice nodded eagerly at Subaru’s offer. “N-not a bad reward. I suppose you have good sense now and then.”

“I’m seriously worried that some guy is gonna take advantage

of you when you grow up."

"Did I sense some snark?"

"Nope, just your imagination. Now, if *I* win…you'll add sending people off and welcoming them home to your list of duties. And not just for Roswaal—this applies to anybody in this mansion."

When Subaru added this provision to the agreement, Beatrice's expression changed sharply. Naturally, she had suspected the conversation would take this sort of turn. Her eyes were deep with fatigue.

"I won't enforce this for little shopping trips to town. But in times like this, when everyone else in the household assembles to send someone off or welcome someone home, *you'll* be there, too. No need to go out of your way to be a wet blanket, right?"

"I truly…truly fail to see why you are so obsessed with this." Beatrice stared thoughtfully at Puck, but she quickly resigned herself. Floating to the floor from her stepladder, she marched over to Subaru and said, "Fine. Tell me the conditions of the wager."

"So you're fine with taking the punishment if you lose?"

"It doesn't matter because I won't lose, I suppose. Now, the conditions."

There was an exasperated quiver in Beatrice's lips—agreeing to Subaru's proposal angered her on a visceral level. Before she could change her mind, Subaru turned to look at the door behind him.

"The rules are simple: a game of tag—well, double tag, actually."

"Tag…? You mean that game where someone is *it* and chases people, I suppose."

"Yup, that's the one. Except the rules are a little different. You'll stay in the mansion proper, and you will be *it*."

When an invisible question mark formed above Beatrice's head, Subaru clarified, "Right now, Emilia is running around the mansion. She's the one you need to catch. But if all you had to do was chase Emilia and catch her, that would be too boring. Though I'd be super stoked if I were *it*."

"Subaru, Subaru, you're going on a tangent," Puck nudged him.

"Sorry. Anyway, while you chase after Emilia, you have to avoid getting caught yourself. If you catch Emilia, you win. But if you're caught before Emilia, you lose—and there you have it. Double tag."

When Beatrice heard the game description, she frowned and

twiddled her ringlets. “And I have to stay in the mansion proper? What about the garden or just outside the gate?”

“The garden is okay, but outside the gate is out of bounds. Also, no using your Passage or any other magic. Shifting planes makes you way too OP for tag, and magic can get people hurt.”

“Hmph—that will put me at a disadvantage, I suppose. How am I supposed to catch Emilia without magic?”

“Use your brain, of course. Hide behind things, cut her off, et cetera. The same rules apply to Emilia—in the end, *shrewdness* will separate the winner from the loser!”

“If you expect that explanation to entice me, there’s something wrong with you.”

Beatrice frowned warily, but she was seriously considering the competition. Beatrice was nothing more than an ordinary little girl without her Passage or magic. Even though the rules were the same, Emilia had an unfair physical advantage.

But if it was a battle of shrewdness, Emilia was most certainly the worst in the mansion. Her honest nature made her gullible. So Beatrice still had a fair chance of winning the game under those rules.

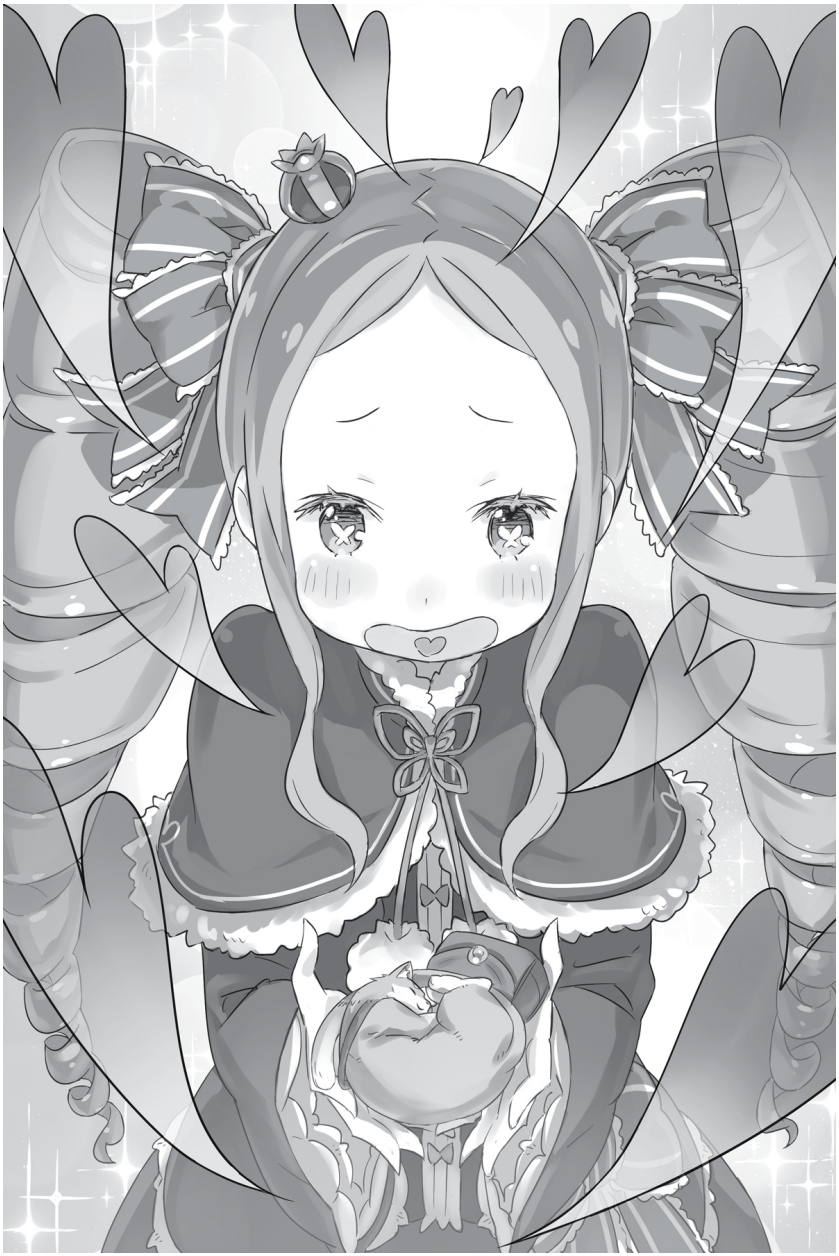
“Very well. Game on, I suppose. However—the younger twin cannot be the one to chase me.”

“You noticed.”

“Of course I did. Not even the great Betty is foolish enough to think she can beat an Oni in a contest of physical strength. I must take *every* precaution in that regard.”

In seeing through Subaru’s shallow wisdom, Beatrice smugly believed she had foiled his plan. If Subaru refused her caveat, there was no way that Beatrice would agree to the contest. Beatrice was in the right, after all. So Subaru reluctantly surrendered Rem’s participation.

“After you leave, I’m going to count to a hundred before I chase after you,” Subaru explained. “Puck is going to stay behind in the Archive of Forbidden Books, so if you use your Passage to cheat, you’ll be caught immediately.”



“Don’t patronize me. I would never do something so shameless.”

Once each party’s terms were agreed upon, Beatrice handed Puck to Subaru. Subaru took this as the signal to tell Emilia the game was on.

“Mm-hm, she’s all set,” Puck confirmed. “Lia is really excited to play. She’s already running in the mansion.”

With a yawn about to escape from his mouth, Puck informed them that everything was good to go. With that, Subaru gestured to Beatrice, and the girl marched to the door, her skirt swishing as she went.

“I’ll end this quickly and get straight to my cuddly tryst with Brother.”

Her eyes brimming with confidence—likely over some scheme—Beatrice waved her hand and exited the Archive of Forbidden Books. As he watched her walk out, Subaru started counting out loud.

“One…two…three…four…five…”

Crushing Subaru’s presumed trump card—Rem—Beatrice assumed she had already won. However, when it came to beating Subaru in a battle of shrewdness, it was safe to say that out of all the mansion members, Beatrice fell on the gullible end of the spectrum.

4

The moment she slipped through the Passage, Beatrice understood she was standing before the dining hall. Beatrice had start-point selection rights. It was she who chose this as her starting point. She was confident that this gave her the best chance of winning.

“Now then—I’ll just find her and end this quickly, I suppose.”

With her previous apathy long gone, Beatrice was taking things seriously now that the game was on. She immediately set out to find Emilia, her goal. But before she could start, she looked up, sensing another presence. And there stood a blue-haired girl at the side of the hallway. It was Rem, the younger and stronger of the twins.

“Lady Beatrice, I see you’ve agreed to play the game.”

“Indeed, I have. But you won’t be playing, I suppose. Betty is immune to that stupid boy’s schemes. I suppose he’s off sulking somewhere right now.”

“Yes, Lady Beatrice, you do have a keen eye. You saw right through Subaru’s plan to command me to do his bidding.”

A hint of disappointment mixed in with Rem’s usual expression as she hung her head. She hadn’t used to display her emotions like this. And it need not be said whose influence had changed her.

Displeased by this, Beatrice snorted daintily and said, “If you overcome this hurdle, stop helping that stupid boy. It’s a waste of time.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Rem replied. “I will consider your advice if you win, Lady Beatrice. But I still think that Subaru is amazing.”

With a smile, Rem vouched for the fool whose plan Beatrice had foiled. Beatrice frowned, sensing an oddness in Rem’s smile. Then, immediately after—

“Ta-*daaah*!”

“Ta-da-*daaah*!”

“Ta-da-da-*daaah*!”

Loud voices suddenly boomed through the mansion, and Beatrice heard doors open in succession behind her. With her shoulders jumping at the surprise attack, Beatrice spun around to see several unfamiliar children tumble from the open doors.

“Wh-who are they…?”

“Children from Earlham Village. They like Subaru, so they’ve agreed to help with the game today. What a natural-born friend Subaru is.”

“Now’s no time to swoon! And who said those village kids could be in here—”

“We got Master Roswaal’s permission before his departure,” Rem assured her. “We’ve locked the rooms they mustn’t go in, so please make sure you don’t go on the third floor of the main building, the dressing room, or the treasury.”

As Rem added more caution, Beatrice’s mind went blank in shock. Upon seeing the petrified Beatrice, the children pointed at her in unison and yelled.

“It’s the girl Subaru told us about!”

“It’s the homebody!”

“Her dress is so cute!”

Spotting their prey, they formed a pack and closed in on Beatrice. Beatrice jumped and ran the opposite way down the hall, overwhelmed by their intensity.

“Incidentally, those children are the people chasing you, Lady Beatrice. Good luck keeping away from them.”

As Rem ran beside her, murmuring the hint in her ear, Beatrice’s face turned bright red.

“The little…! He is far shrewder than Betty accounted for, I suppose!”

Subaru was able to sneak the children into the mansion by omitting the number of people who would be chasing Beatrice, feigning defeat over his plan to use Rem backfiring, and pretending to have his ace in the hole stolen.

Just how many moves ahead of her was he willing to think just to win this trivial game?

“Go!”

“Get her!”

“Take everything she’s got!”

As she ran from the clamoring children, Beatrice cursed the image of a puffed-up Subaru in her head all the harder.

“That mongrel… He’s not getting away with this!”

5

Beatrice’s game of double tag got much more cutthroat after that.

“Ooh! It’s Beatrice. Gotta run!”

“Found you, I suppose! I won’t let you get away!”

She found Emilia in the west wing, but the difference in stride and nimbleness left Beatrice in the dust. However, Emilia’s means of escape was an open book. If Beatrice went the other way and cut her off—

“Found you!”

“There she is!”

“My wife!”

“You brats made it all the way here?! Just give up already!”

But the gang of children surrounded her from every side, forcing Beatrice to turn and run in the opposite direction. There was no point in pursuing Emilia too closely if she got caught. What’s more, children were endless balls of energy. They weren’t the

brightest, but in numbers and enthusiasm, they were—simply put—formidable foes.

"Besides, the children are the least of my problems, I suppose…!"

Emilia evaded her. The children pursued her. However, unexpected though their presence was, her biggest weakness in this game of tag was her gullibility. And the even bigger problem facing her right then was—

"—That instigator has yet to show his smarmy face."

Subaru—the instigator of the bet and her presumed final pursuer in the game. Not once had Beatrice seen the evil one since the game began.

Not even Beatrice could evade Subaru as easily as the children. She was slower than Subaru, for one, and his eccentric ideas were vastly superior to anything the children could come up with. The way he hoodwinked her regarding the rules made Beatrice that much warier.

She dared him to come at her from any direction…yet she also hoped he would stay away. It was this line of thinking that had, oddly, already made her lose the game. But in her heightened state of concentration, Beatrice did not realize this.

"___Hah!"

She leaped down the stairs in one jump, her skirt fluttering as she landed. She launched herself from the carpet and ran down the hall from the west wing to the main building. And then—

"Oh no!"

Emilia, who just happened to pop out from the room directly ahead, took off running at the sight of Beatrice. Homing in on the dancing silver hair, Beatrice accelerated to catch her.

"You won't escape, I suppose! Just surrender!"

"I won't! I'm having too much fun! I want to play more! I'm still in this!"

"And I'm telling you, it's okay to quit!"

The absentminded banter continued as the two ran. Until the children, who found her by the voices, appeared behind Beatrice.

"Found you!"

"We're here!"

"Saw you!"

"We won!"

"Oh, just shut up, all of you!"

Oblivious to Beatrice's plight, the children ran for her with animalistic rage. It was a dead heat with Emilia in the lead, Beatrice in the middle, and the children in the rear.

With the participants of the double tag game all in a line, Emilia ran not up but down. She jumped from the second floor to the first, heading not for the east wing but for the center of the mansion.

Beatrice turned her head to look behind her and saw the children were far behind. She would catch the rabbit in front of her before they caught up to her. Beatrice the Huntress gave a triumphant shout of victory.

"You're trapped, I suppose!"

"Umm…umm…"

Her eyes darting left and right, Emilia looked for a place to escape. Taking advantage of the half-elf's fluster, Beatrice pounced for the kill.

To lure Emilia to the center of the main building, where she had set her trap—

"Hold it! I won't let you run into the dining hall!" Beatrice cried.

"—The dining hall!"

Too gullible.

If Emilia were to lose, her gullible heart would be the cause. When Beatrice cried out, she reflexively assumed the dining hall would be her salvation. This move was so simple that it almost worried Beatrice, who set the trap.

That being said, a competition was a competition. And now that the rabbit had fallen into her trap, her fate was sealed.

"Wait a minute, is this place—" Emilia shrieked madly when she opened the door to the dining hall and jumped inside. The dining hall she jumped into to hide was the room Beatrice had connected to the Archive of Forbidden Books via her Passage.

In other words, as long as she did not create any new Passages, the dining hall door would connect to the Archive. The Archive was a dead end. Emilia would be forced to an unexpected standstill.

In her familiar home turf, the mighty huntress could easily pounce on her petrified prey and end the game—

"It would seem that Betty was one step—nay, *ten* steps ahead of you!!"

Convinced of her victory, Beatrice performed a sharp turn and

lunged into the dining hall—the Archive of Forbidden Books. Then she reached out to the back of the petrified Emilia and—

"___Welcome hooome!"

"Ngah?!"

A pair of arms dove in from the side, catching Beatrice. Both arms restrained from behind, Beatrice kicked her legs. She turned around, wondering what had happened—and the devilishly smiling eyes of Subaru met hers.

Sitting primly atop the stepladder, Puck looked down at the restrained Beatrice and said mercilessly, "Game overrrr. I'm so sorry, but as you can see, Subaru wins, Betty."

As Emilia smiled sheepishly beside him and the children who followed her into the room high-fived in victory—all Beatrice could do was look on in shock.

"What did I tell ya, Beatrice?" Subaru loosened his hold on Beatrice, turned her to face him, and said, "It was a battle of shrewdness. Did you *honestly* think you could beat me?"

Infuriated by his smug smile, Beatrice planted her knee right in Subaru's solar plexus.

6

"From the very start, I predicted you would lure Emilia into the Archive of Forbidden Books. Using your Passage to mess with people is kind of your thing."

"*Mrrrg*, I suppose…!"

Beatrice growled bitterly and ground her teeth upon hearing the game postmortem. Subaru rubbed his sore solar plexus as he drank in her sweet, sweet tears of defeat.

Subaru's double tag strategy was quite simple.

First, he would trick Beatrice into being chased by multiple *its*. He would lull her into a false sense of security with the Rem red herring, then slam her with child reinforcements. Once this robbed Beatrice of her composure, he would use Emilia as bait to string her along for the kill.

"I told Emilia where the start point was and told her to run into the Archive of Forbidden Books when the moment was right," Subaru explained. "Then all I had to do was wait in the Archive and grab you. When a huntress lunges for her prey, that's when she is most vulnerable, you know."

Subaru's smug account of his playbook received no rebuttals from Beatrice. Subaru had played her like a violin, and anything she said would make her sound like a sore loser. Sitting on her usual stepladder, hugging her knees to herself, it took everything in her to just glare at Subaru in silence.

"But man, tough break, huh? What was it you said at the end? You were 'one step—nay, *ten* steps ahead of her'? Well, sorry, but it turns out I was eleven steps ahead!"

"Could you just get off your high horse, I wonder?!"

"Nah-nah-nah-*poo-poo*!"

The taunting was too much for her to take, and Beatrice's rage exploded in a shockwave and slammed Subaru against a wall. Beatrice snorted at him and said, "You are shrewd. I'll give you that, but you've no right to laugh at me. I was never all that invested in this game to begin with. And you—"

"You wanna pretend this never happened—isn't that a little too convenient? Just think of how angry and sad poor Puck will be. Like, *Waaah, I didn't raise my little girl to be like this!*"

"You really are an infuriating boy…"

Beatrice spat at Subaru's mimicry. But as he looked at her emotional face from the side, Subaru sighed and said, "Well…if you're that upset, I'll at least consider it."

"…What brought about this sudden change of tune, I wonder?"

"Well, even I'm kinda ashamed of how childish I acted. I came fully prepared and beat you to a pulp—I went too far. It's just that you danced so nicely in the palm of my hand that I got carried away…"

"And *you* haven't gotten *enough* dancing out of my magic, I suppose."

Beatrice was displeased at the overly brazen way Subaru expressed his feelings. But they were his true feelings. However, it need not be said that he didn't think the bet itself was a mistake.

"Yeah, and a part of me is sorry I forced you to do this. I assumed you'd hate it at first, but once you got into it, you'd like it—but it wasn't my intention to be so pushy, either."

"Then you should have said so at the start, I suppose… What exactly *were* you trying to do anyway?"

"Hmmm…it's a mystery, even to me. But after playing this game today, I think I saw what I wanted to see—I didn't know you could run with such spirit."

"Grrr…"

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Subaru smiled at the puffy-cheeked Beatrice and said, "Even though you were an unwilling participant, I had fun today. And I think Emilia and the village kids did, too. Not a bad compromise if I do say so myself."

"*Why* does it feel like I keep drawing the shortest straw, I wonder?"

"That's neither here nor there. Just take the L and give up," Subaru told the pouting Beatrice as he stood and headed for the Archive of Forbidden Books door.

He had turned the mansion into a playground. If it wasn't back in order as promised by the time Roswaal returned, Ram's terrifying punishment would be awaiting him.

"Beako."

Subaru stopped short of leaving the room and turned to look at Beatrice. She didn't answer him. But Beatrice glared sharply enough to hurt him.

"Let's play again sometime."

Before she could say yes or no or give any reaction, Subaru shut the door. The Passage activated, and Subaru returned to the mansion dining hall. Emilia and Rem had just arrived there.

Subaru tiredly raised his hand and said, "'Sup. Good job, everyone."

"And good job to you, too, Subaru," Rem replied politely.

"Sorry to trouble you so much today, Rem. I felt bad shoving those little kids into your care out of nowhere. They're noisy, and I'll bet they wouldn't listen to you, right?"

"Oh, not at all. Everyone behaved very nicely. And when I gave them all cakes to take home as parting gifts, they asked if they might visit the mansion again sometime."

"Um, did you and I even handle the same group of kids?!"

While they were insolent with Subaru, they were apparently little angels with Rem. Subaru would have to give them the third degree about it when he saw them at their next radio aerobics.

He also needed to express his gratitude to them for helping him.

"So did you manage to talk it out with Beatrice? I hope she wasn't too angry?"

While Subaru frowned grimly over the children's behavior, Emilia tilted her head inquisitively. She really wanted to know how things turned out. Her gaze was directed at the dining hall door—

her mind on the Archive of Forbidden Books behind it.

"Well, she did seem to accept defeat…but when it comes to our bet, things are kind of in limbo. The bet was sort of the icing on the cake for me anyway."

"Really? Then why did we even play tag in the first place?"

"Because it's fun, of course. I wanted to teach a little unhealthy shut-in the joy of running around with kids her own age. And in that regard, I'd say things went rather swimmingly."

Emilia looked a bit surprised by Subaru's playful wink. But she soon gave a tired sigh and smiled.

"No, you're right. And I'm sure Beatrice did have fun. I mean, I had a *really* great time."

"Glad to hear it… Now we'd better clean up this party mess."

Subaru scratched his cheek to cover his embarrassment over how Emilia's smile made him swoon. Then Rem tugged on his sleeve and said, "Tidying up is good and all, but we should rest first. Master Roswaal and my sister won't return until tomorrow night. We still have plenty of time."

"That's right, Rem made us some sweets," Emilia chimed in. "Why don't we have some tea before we tidy up? Truth be told, I'd love to invite Beatrice to join us, but…"

"Yeahhh, she'll turn us down…I think?" Subaru said.

"Then I'll send some treats to her through Puck," Emilia suggested. "Then we'll be even."

Even Beatrice's sulkiest of moods would surely be improved by a visit from Puck. Though it was hard to believe Emilia would have had such calculations in her innocent suggestion.

"All right then, Subaru, let's go have tea," Rem said.

"Yes, yes, let's go!"

"Okay, I'll take a break. It would be bad to half-ass the job and face Ram's wrath."

The two girls seemed in high spirits to Subaru, but this was because the day had a special meaning for both of them as well. Perhaps this made Subaru's putting his cunning to work that day worth it.

"I just hope you feel it was worth it, too," Subaru murmured to the scowling little girl who wasn't there.

And then he slowly opened the door to the dining hall and found himself enveloped by all the sweet smells within.

7

After a full day of cleaning up after the game of tag—it was evening, just before the master of the house was to return.

"Those snotty little brats. They really did a number on this manor," Subaru grumbled.

"Good thing they didn't break anything," Rem said. "It was wise of us to sequester all the breakable items out of their reach."

"Hey, you two, the place looks great! Sorry I had to leave halfway through cleaning."

Subaru rolled his shoulders, and Rem smiled as they made their way to the front hall. Emilia happened to come down the stairs and joined them in the front to wait for Roswaal's return.

"Boy, Rozchi sure is blessed to have you greet him personally, Emilia-tan."

"Really? Well, what you said yesterday made me realize the importance of hellos and good-byes. I hadn't given it much thought before, but now I want to treat them with more solemnity and reverence."

"Er, take it easy, okay? You don't have to take it *that* seriously."

Subaru smiled sheepishly at Emilia, whose fists were balled in an uncharacteristic ebullience. Her honest diligence made her psychology vulnerable to instantaneous manipulation.

Just as the trio settled into their usual banter—

The trio perked their ears at the sound of footsteps. They were quiet, and there was a hint of hesitation, so they immediately knew who it was. They widened their eyes, and they smiled.

The newcomer walked up to the trio without a word. Then she sighed quietly in defeat. The trio let her into their fold without asking her why she was there. There was a silent understanding among them that they shouldn't.

Now they were a quartet.

Time quietly passed until they heard voices behind the door. The door opened—

"Welcome home!"

Three cheerful voices (and one reserved voice) greeted their master as he stepped over the threshold.

SOME LIKE IT COLD

1

____It was a terribly modest and gradual omen of transition.

"Good morning, Subaru."

"Ahh, morning," Subaru yawned. "Hey, Rem…is it just me, or is it cold?"

"Yes, I do think it is a tad chilly this morning. Your perceptiveness never ceases to impress me, Subaru."

"Uh, anybody would notice the cold, but okay?"

It was early morning at Roswaal Manor. When Rem offered Subaru a morning greeting in the hallway, Subaru innocently brought up the temperature. Even though it was still early, it was especially chilly. It was so balmy the day before that they had sweat during work, but the temperature had dropped drastically overnight.

It was so cold that Subaru closed his uniform jacket. He even buttoned his shirt up all the way.

"I'm fine, but that uniform can't be helping you stay warm, Rem. Don't maids have cold-weather uniforms here? That doesn't look comfortable."

"Once ice season comes, we do change uniforms. The fabric is thicker and lined, so it's quite cozy," Rem said with a smile.

She was dressed in her usual maid's uniform. Since the design dramatically exposed her shoulders and legs, what was normally a feast for the eyes now only made Subaru shiver.

Incidentally, *ice season* was another word for winter in this world. Conversely, summer was referred to as *fire season*. This world seemed to have four distinct seasons, just like Subaru's.

"But as cold as it is today, shouldn't you be wearing your ice season uniform? If it's a touchy subject, I can always go ask Rozchi

directly for you."

"I appreciate your concern, Subaru, but my sister and I are used to it, so we're perfectly comfortable. It's nothing to trouble Master Roswaal over."

Rem courageously shook her head at Subaru's offer. Subaru didn't seem to accept the excuse, but he still withdrew the offer.

"If you say so, Rem… By the way, where *is* your sister? Is she not with you today?"

"That's right. She didn't wish to leave her bed today due to the cold, so I let her sleep in."

"Rem—didn't you *just say* you're both perfectly comfortable?!"

Picturing Ram cozy and warm in her bed that very minute, Subaru sighed, wishing divine retribution upon Ram for taking advantage of her little sister's kindness.

"Well, I can't let this stand. Whether it's hot or cold, live-in servants never have a day off—I'm gonna pound that lesson into Big Sis. Let's go, Rem."

"But she's tired from her daily work. I don't see the problem with letting her sleep in on a cold day—"

"Let's *go*, Rem!"

"All right, Subaru!"

The scales of Rem's heart tipped in a breath, and she cheerfully followed Subaru as he lumbered down the hall.

In the end, after dragging the elder twin from her bed, Subaru had to work under both the chilling breeze and the resentful wrath of Ram.

2

____And then, the day after an icy chilling of Ram's mood and cold air:

Subaru yawned. "I'm sleepy, and it's cold…wait, is that Beako?"

"*Gross*, I suppose."

Waking early once again and walking down the empty hallway, Subaru encountered a girl in a dress shuffling down the way—Beatrice.

With her iconically elaborate sausage curls, she was the second-least suited to sneaking around in the mansion. (It need not be said, but the least suited was the master of the house himself.)

“Dude, what’re you doing up this early? I hope you didn’t pull an all-nighter. If you don’t sleep, you won’t grow up big and strong, and if you read in the dark, you’ll ruin your eyes.”

“Your criticisms are oblique *and* unwarranted, I suppose. My height and my sight are of no concern to you…and besides, I don’t have time to waste entertaining the likes of you. Now—get out of my sight.”

“Fine, I can take a hint. By the way, isn’t it, like, *crazy* cold today? It felt freezing yesterday, too, but it’s like another level colder today…”

“You can’t take *any* hints, I suppose! I *said* I don’t have time to waste entertaining you!”

Confused by the colder-than-yesterday weather, Subaru walked up to the wailing Beatrice. She was blatantly displeased, but Subaru snorted and opted to ignore her.

The sharp coldness in the air came from an icy draft that pierced the skin now and then. In the cloudiness out the window, the trees seemed to cry in pain with each shake of their leaves in the breeze.

“It’s easy to catch a cold when the seasons change, so you should be careful, Beako.”

“Hmph. You’ve no need to worry, I suppose. Betty is no weakling. Know your place, boy.”

“I’m not *worried* about you—more like, I don’t want to have to bother myself taking care of your sick ass. Your room’s so hard to find that your rice porridge will get cold, and poor Rem’s feelings will be hurt. At least try to be nice when you’re sick, you snotty little loli.”

“*Why* must I be criticized even in hypothetical situations, I wonder!”

Denounced in Subaru’s self-serving fantasy, Beatrice stomped in resentment. But she quickly regained her puffed-up composure, shooed her hand at Subaru as if he were an insect, and said, “Anyway, I am quite busy. Instead of complaining about the cold, you’re better off desperately doing your chores until you collapse, I suppose.”

“Busy, my ass. You’re just reading in your room… Oh, that’s an idea.”

“I’m going now.” Betty turned to walk away.

Subaru grabbed her shoulders and smiled. “You should help out

with the chores sometimes. If you move your body, you'll keep the cold at bay, and exercise decreases your risk of catching a cold, so that's two birds with one stone—lucky you!"

Beatrice looked over her shoulder in annoyance and said, "Let me go. I'm busy—*how* many times must I tell you, I wonder?"

"Fine, fine, I can take a hint. I'll tell Rozchi to give you some allowance if you help, so be a good little girl and pull the weeds in the yard."

"Ngah?! You think *that's* why I'm upset? Inconceivable! And *listen* to me for once! You need to stop messing around!"

Subaru picked up the red-faced Beatrice and began to carry her, kicking and screaming, down the hall. Strangely enough, she wasn't fighting back with magic today. This perplexed Subaru, but he let it go since her lack of resistance suited him.

"Okay, let's have a good run! With lots of energy—let's blast the cold away!"

"Once you let me down, I'm blasting *you* away, I suppose!"

Holding the nearly erupting Beatrice in his arms, Subaru sprinted down the hall. And all day, Beatrice's shrill screams echoed through the mansion.

3

Now then, the day after Subaru's day of playing with Beatrice.

"Well, well, weeell, aren't we up early this morning, Subaru."

"H-hi, Rozchi…Y-yeah, it is kinda early…"

A servant never had a day off that felt like a day off. Subaru was once again up early in the hallway, greeting the master of the house, Marquis Roswaal L Mathers. Today, just like any other, the eccentric aristocrat wore his clownish makeup proudly on his face.

Under the gaze of his heterochromatic eyes—blue and gold—Subaru shivered as he managed to get out a "Good morning," then he cracked his neck and slapped his cheeks as he gazed out the window.

Roswaal gave him a curious look and said, "You don't look very well today, my boooy. What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? It's freaking cold, that's what's wrong!" Subaru cried in a flash of white breath, the last straw finally broken.

It was cold—*too* cold. The snot dribbled out of his nose, and it

promptly froze. Subaru stomped on the floor and said, “There’s something wrong with this climate! Until yesterday, I thought maybe I was just imagining things, but that’s not gonna fly today! The windows are iced over, and my breath is solid white!”

Subaru pointed at the frozen windowsill. His body was wrapped in layers of blankets. He had put his servant’s uniform over his sleeping sweats—his ensemble was a desecration of society’s conventional fashion. But even with all these precautions, the cold threatened to seep through the cracks in his blankets and steal his life.

“What gives? Is the change of seasons around these parts really that extreme? We’re talking a difference of like twenty degrees on the daily here! With a sudden temperature plunge, even bears would freeze to death before they made it to their dens for hibernation!”

“Oh dear, oh dear, you poor frail little lad. You mustn’t be that way, my boy. Always keep a positive mind and body. No matter how cold the weather gets, always keep a calm mind and—”

“That’s rich, coming from a guy in a fluffy fur coat!”

Roswaal’s stirring mind-over-matter speech was incredibly unconvincing because he was brazenly wearing cold-weather clothing. He was quite the spectacle with his thick fur coat and winter clothes. He could probably survive the coldest snowy mountain in that ensemble.

“The extreme discrepancy in our quality of dress could get you convicted for attempted murder at this rate…*zniffle*!”

“Your sinister staring and sniveling sinuses show that we prooobably have reached our limit… I would have turned a blind eye yesterday, but it’s just come tooooo far for that now.”

“You sound like you know what’s causing this cold…so let’s do something about it! If some winter demon beast is causing it, let’s kill him. And make a big spectacle of it, too. C’mon, Master, help a guy out—*zniffle*!”

As Roswaal put a hand to his chin in thought, Subaru stomped his feet in a pitter-patter, adding kindling to the fire. Subaru had reached his limit between the frozen snot and his frozen brain. It wouldn’t be long before he broke the moral code and started ripping other people’s clothes off.

“Tell me, Subaru, by any *chance*, do you not handle the cold very well?”

“I complain about the cold in the winter, I complain about the heat in the summer, I complain about how tired I am in the spring, and I complain about how expensive matsutake is in the fall. I don’t handle any sort of change well—*zniffle*!”

“I don’t exactly know what ‘matsutake’ is, but you’ve made it quite clear that you are a very impatient young man. Then you leave me no choice. I’ll just have to complain to the one who caused this.”

Flipping his fur coat, Roswaal began to walk. Subaru followed behind. Subaru looked at the scenery outside the frozen-white windows as his feet sank into the deep carpet and frowned.

“Something outside catch your interest?” Roswaal asked.

“Well, yeah. I grew up in a temperate zone, so I don’t know much about snow. However, isn’t it cold enough for snow right now? If it snows, the village fields will freeze, and it’ll be hell to plow them.”

Earlham, the village near Roswaal Manor, was approaching harvesting season. Subaru, who was friendly with the villagers, had promised the children that he would help with the harvest. Even if he took back his promise, this was not the time of year when snow was a welcome visitor.

“Well, I understand…you are *quite* close with the villagers, especially the children.”

“Not that close. I don’t actually care for kids—way too selfish and reckless. I’m just nice to them because they’ve taken a liking to me…”

“Yes, yes, I suppose you’ve just given a great example of what your hometown calls *tsundere* characteristics.”

“*Zniffle!* Ack, my nose is gonna get frostbite! *Zniffle-zniffle!* This’s bad, dude!”

Subaru forced the focus onto his nose to avoid facing an inconvenient truth. Roswaal smirked and let his hard segue pass without comment as he touched the foggy window with a finger and said, “Well, rest at ease, my boy. The cold *surely* hasn’t reached the village. The cold only extends to the perimeter of my property.”

“Not exactly reassuring, my dude! What *is* this mysterious phenomenon? How does this sort of thing even happen?!”

“We’ve got not one but *two* little lovelies making the rounds to ensure the cold does not travel beyond my property. And I believe *one* of them was secretly at work just before *you* apprehended her

yesterday?"

"…You mean Beatrice?"

Roswaal's cryptic response reminded Subaru of Beatrice's odd behavior the day before. What she was doing so early that morning was a mystery, but it seemed she was trying to combat the cold. And if he needed to borrow Beatrice's help, it was clear who they were all up against—

"Now, I don't suppose I need to tell you just *who* was the cause of all of this cold, *hmmm*?"

Subaru arrived at the answer just as Roswaal stopped walking. They were on the top floor of Roswaal Manor's east wing. The door before them led to a room Subaru frequented. After all, this was a room he made a habit of stopping by once a day.

Roswaal called to the door. "Lady Emilia, sorry to disturb you so early in the morning. Maaay we speak with you for a minute?"

A frantic voice sounded from the room. "Roswaal?! Um…um… just a minute! Be right there!"

The bell-like voice was clear, even through the wall. When he heard it, Subaru was filled with panic, and he couldn't hide. Something felt amiss. Starting with the very fact that the occupant of this room was awake at this hour.

During the few weeks they'd lived together under the same roof, Subaru had noticed she wasn't exactly an early riser.

"Suuubaaaruuu?" Roswaal called, pointing to the doorknob with a grim frown on his brow. He didn't mean for Subaru to open it. Doubtfully, Subaru reached for the doorknob.

"It's cold?! What the hell?! Emilia-tan, are you okay?!"

"What?! Oh, you're there, too, Subaru?!"

"I am, but who cares—isn't there something more important you have to say right now?!"

"Something important? To say? Um…good morning?"

"Ah, what good manners to greet me even in a—wait, *no*! Agh, I'm just coming in, okay?!"

The doorknob was so cold that it felt like it was made of pure ice. With the doorknob this cold, it was likely that the room was filled with an even more intense cold.

"I'm coming in! If you happen to be getting dressed, thanks!"

"Don't you mean *sorry*?!"

Subaru threw the door open, his pure concern and deviant desires on full display. The door resisted, cracking from the floor as

the cold that was once sealed inside the room burst out of it.

"What the *shit*?! It's freezing! How did this even happen?!"

Crying out in the unimaginably cold blast, Subaru's shocked eyes scanned the inside of the room. There, he found Emilia standing still with her back to the bed, both arms stretched out.

Her flustered face was red as she desperately tried to hide her bed from Subaru's view.

"Emilia-tan, how did this—"

"Y-you bad boy! How dare you come into a person's room without their permission… It's rude. That's right, it's *really* rude! So —you know—um—do it over!"

"So that's what Emilia-tan is saying, but what does the master of the house say?"

"I permit him to enteeeer."

"Roswaal!"

Pushing Emilia's protests aside on a unilateral technicality, Subaru finally entered the room. The source of the extreme cold unmistakably lay in her room. And from Roswaal's testimony, Beatrice's actions, and Emilia's body language resembling a child trying to hide their prank, it was obvious what it was.

"So where's Puck? He's the source of this, and as representative of the Cold Haters, I've got a bone to pick with him."

"The source? The source of what? I have no idea what you're— well, um—okay, it's not like I have *no* idea, but I still don't know what you're talking about."

"It's okay, Lia—either way, it looks like you can't hide me anymore."

Emilia's frantic stubbornness and strange inability to hide her lies in her subterfuge were brought to a close by the instigator himself.

Emilia raised her eyebrows, turned to face the bed, and put her hands on her hips.

"Oh, Puck, you big dummy! We almost had them fooled…"

"Sorry, Emilia-tan, but you couldn't fool anybody in a million years."

"Huh?!"

Subaru slipped past the genuinely shocked Emilia and peered into the bed behind her. The cat, the presumed source of the extreme cold, lay curled up on a small, rumpled blanket on her bed.

"You really look like a cat when you're curled up like that."

“Mmm, sorry? Didn’t mean to cause this mess.”

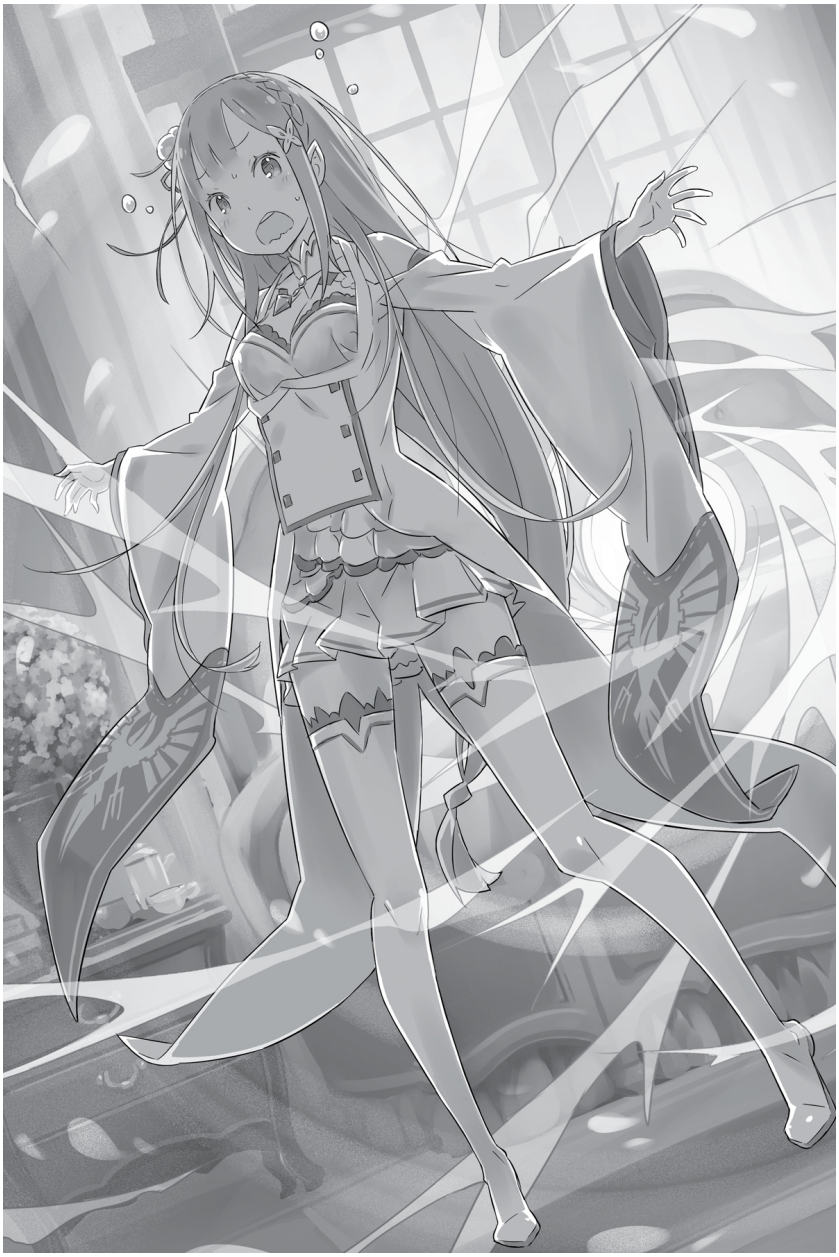
The gray ball of fur squirmed at the sound of the voice, his beady black eyes looking up at Subaru. The palm-sized cat smiled sheepishly at Emilia’s look of disappointment and said, “Please, don’t get angry with Betty and Lia. They just wanted to do something nice for me.”

And with that, Puck stood up to defend his beloved daughter and little sister.

4

“____*Magicking* season?”

Subaru craned his neck, confused by the unfamiliar term.



They had moved to the Roswaal Manor dining hall, and all residents were present. Including the sleepy-headed Ram and the reluctantly present Beatrice, they all sat around the table under which Puck sat.

Emilia told them the truth—that Puck was the source of the extreme cold—and when she was asked what the cause was, the unfamiliar term *magicking season* was given.

"What's *magicking* season? Are you sure you don't mean *mating* season?"

"Of course I don't have a mating season. What do you take me for, some common animal? Rude!"

"Yeah, no comment…for a number of reasons."

As Puck—the spitting image of a cat—washed his face, Subaru turned his perplexed eyes on the rest of the table. It was Rem who raised a hand to answer.

Given yesterday's dramatic drop in temperature, Rem had changed into her ice season maid's uniform that morning. The uniform didn't expose nearly as much skin, but the sight of her still-short skirt and bare legs beneath it gave Subaru the chills. Even in another world, it still baffled him what sort of thought process led girls to wear skirts in the wintertime.

"Magicking season is a phenomenon that happens periodically only to beings with powerful magic," Rem explained. "Since a magic's strength is determined by the Odo—the core essence of magic—it truly is restrictive."

"What was Odo again—it's, like, not the same as a Gate or mana?"

As far as Subaru knew, mana was the source of magic in this world. The organ that circulated mana through the body was called a Gate, and the Gate connected directly with a magic user's attributes.

Incidentally, Subaru's attributes as a magic user were mediocre. Moreover, since he had strained his Gate, he was strictly forbidden from using magic.

"So from what you're saying, Rem, Odo is more fundamental than mana or your Gate, right?"

"—For a servant of Master Roswaal, your extreme lack of knowledge is downright *criminal*." Ram gave a blatant sigh at

Subaru's mediocre knowledge of magic. She sat beside Rem, dressed in thicker layers. Narrowing her eyes, she continued, "If you don't know what Odo is, I doubt you even have any common sense. Your shallowness has reached new heights, Barusu."

"Maybe it's just the cold, but Big Sis sure sounds extra icy today."

Her already sharp tongue stung even harder in the bitter cold. Hugging her younger twin's arm for warmth, Ram breathed out white as she insulted Subaru. But the cute earmuffs she wore on her head took the bite out of her bark.

"Turns out my theory about you the other day was right, Big Sis—*you* don't like the cold."

"Everyone has strong points and weaknesses—it's only a subjective problem. And I don't approach life with such a narrow-minded perspective. Keep your mouth shut, simpleton. Just die already."

"The last part was carelessly scathing!"

"This is nothing new, but whenever I leave things to you lot, nothing ever gets done, I suppose."

Unable to stand Ram's grumpiness and Subaru's quippiness despite the cold, Beatrice joined the conversation. Wearing her usual dress, she pointed a finger at Subaru and said, "*Fine*, I'll just have to explain it myself. Odo is the nucleus of life, I suppose… It is the source of magic found in every spirit, human, and demon beast. Odo is like a vessel for magic, and it's also an organ that can store magic brought in through a Gate."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, a vessel that stores mana. Continue."

"An irritating response, I suppose… Anyway, the more superior the Odo, the more mana it can handle. However, every vessel has its storage limit, I suppose. And if an Odo exceeds its capacity, the mana spills out… Before that happens, it must be released."

"You've gotta release it before your guts explode…so it's kinda like constipation?"

"There are better comparisons, I suppose!"

When Subaru interpreted Beatrice's explanation to suit him, she was more than resentful. But thanks to her, he now had a general idea of what had caused the problem.

"So if I'm understanding you correctly—Puck has to *fart* out all the pent-up mana inside him, and that's what's causing the extreme cold?"

“Yeah…that’s basically it. Sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Now that the truth was out in the open, Emilia hung her head in shame. As her kitty’s guardian, his bad behavior was her responsibility. With a sympathetic look to her, Subaru turned to the war criminal—Puck—and said, “What an inconsiderate way to relieve constipation… So is this a recurring thing?”

“It happens about once a year. When I lived in the forest with Lia, I was able to release it moderately, but ever since we moved here, I’ve been behaving so politely that I’m paying the price now. Tee-hee.”

“Tee-hee, my ass.” Subaru rolled his eyes at the giggling cat, folded his arms, and continued. “Anyway, releasing your, um, magic is really important, so no complaints there. But why have the side effects dramatically amplified over the past three days? There’s gotta be some other way.”

“Hmmm—at first, I released it gradually so the effects would be minimal. But since I had way more mana to expel than usual, and since nobody was complaining about the cold, I thought to myself—*Huh, maybe I can go a little harder? Yeah, let’s do it! Everyone’s more gullible than I thought!*—aaand here we are.”

“Could you *be* any sloppier?!”

What Subaru assumed was some sort of inescapable circumstance turned out to be the consequence of simple negligence. Knowing that the bottomless cold suffocating the mansion resulted from Puck’s hubris further fueled Subaru’s discontent.

“Magicking season is an inextricable matter for spirits as great as my brother,” Beatrice explained. “On the grounds that he is so cute and fluffy, we should stop making such a fuss, I suppose—*sniff-sniff*.”

“You’re just as snotty as I am! —And hey, I just realized something: You sneakily put up barriers to contain the cold because you didn’t want your precious brother to get caught. Am I wrong? Gimme the truth!”

“*Squeeeeeakle!* I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Your nose squeaked!”

Even with her nose bright red from the cold, Beatrice refused to turn on Puck. While Subaru sighed in frustration over what to do about her, Emilia diplomatically cut in.

“Please, just listen—Puck and I both feel *really* sorry about what

happened. But Puck's magicking season should be over very soon… isn't that right, Puck?"

"Yup. If I keep up the same pace for two more days, that'll be more than enough."

"But the rest of us have already had more than enough!" Subaru yelled. "If it gets any colder, you'll find me and Ram frozen to death, our corpses rolling down the hall tomorrow morning!"

Considering he was the instigator, Puck wasn't giving the situation the gravity it deserved. He didn't seem to feel the cold, so the whole thing struck him as nothing worth fretting about.

"Right, I wasn't worried about Puck because he's a spirit and has that fur coat, but Emilia-tan, aren't you cold in that outfit? I wanna see you in a cute fur coat."

Though he let his ulterior motive slip out at the end, Subaru said most of that out of concern for Emilia's well-being. Emilia was dressed in her usual light clothing despite the extreme cold.

Subaru's question made Emilia look down with even more guilt as she said, "Um, well, Puck and I are bound together in a covenant, right? So I can protect myself from the effects of his magic. That's why—this cold—um—I'm okay…"

Emilia felt so terrible that she seemed to shrink smaller and smaller with each word. Apparently, she felt guilty in part because she was unaffected. Her father figure's antics, causing a panic and sparing only her, surely must have tortured her conscience.

"Aren't you ashamed to cause your daughter so much trouble?" Subaru scolded the spirit. "C'mon, let's come up with a solution."

"Hey, I do feel bad about it, okay? Even I wish there were some other way to do this. Got any ideas? It has to be something that uses a lot of mana."

"Can't you just expel a blast of powerful magic up into the sky or something?"

"Oh, so you're giving me your consent, right? I'm allowed to bring about the apocalypse—"

"Um, *no*?!"

"Only kidding," Puck sang.

Bargaining cataclysms and apocalypses wasn't exactly the wisest thing to joke about. Worrying that an accidental *yes* would usher in an epic calamity, Subaru decided to keep his lighthearted quips at bay for a while.

"But this cold is a problem—things aren't getting done around

the house," Rem lamented. "Ram's productivity has fallen exponentially during the past three days."

"Well, obviously it's gonna fall to nothing if she can't even get out of bed," Subaru scoffed. "So are spirits the only creatures who have magicking season? What about other powerful magic users… like Rozchi and Beako?"

If you expanded the definition of "powerful magic users," Beatrice and Roswaal would be no exception. The conversation thrust upon them, Roswaal shrugged his shoulders, and Beatrice tugged on her curls.

"Well, *I* use magic on a daily basis and maaaanage it that way," Roswaal said. "Since I also use magic for my work, my Odo always has plenty of room to spare."

"Why do you need Ram for your daily wor—you know, never mind. I don't wanna know."

Roswaal shot Ram a sideways glance. She blushed and looked down. The sketchy and inappropriate relationship between the master of the house and his maid felt uncomfortably raw to Subaru when he was this close to it.

"I regulate my mana well enough managing the Archive and using my Passage, I suppose," Beatrice said. "Oh, right, and blasting away a certain annoying human has helped recently, too."

"Yes, yes, that's nice, dear." Ignoring the baiting jab from the puffed-up little girl, Subaru turned next to Emilia and Rem. "Then what about you girls? Do you have mating—er, I mean, magicking season?"

"Well, no," Rem said. "Magicking season requires a particularly powerful magic that not very many beings possess…"

Emilia chimed in. "I'm too much of a magic *dunce* to have a magicking season—oh, then again, I have a lot of experience with it because of Puck. So I really am sorry about this. I should have known better…"

"Dang, Emilia-tan, you're really on a self-deprecating kick today!"

Her honest and diligent personality was having an adverse effect for once. So Subaru had no recourse but to turn to the instigator, who showed no remorse in the little girl's arms, and lend him a hand.

"Okay. Let's fill our bellies with good energy and find a solution. First, here's a question—when was the last time you really

got to use magic to your heart's content?"

"I guess that would have to be when I fought that dark girl in the capital. I almost used up all my mana then."

"All the good energy is slipping out of my belly!"

Subaru's memory of the Bowel Hunter killing him brought the pain of his month-old belly wound searing back to the surface. There was no way in hell he could bring that psycho back to the mansion just to help Puck blow off a little magic steam.

"Well, if that won't work, then it would have to be the time Roswaal came to the forest to get Lia. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I have a feeling we brawled hard that day."

"*Ohhh*, right. That was most certainly very intense. That just maaay be the first time I've ever fought so hard."

"Well, you just showed up without an appointment, so I freaked out," Puck chuckled.

"Well, we did clash in earnest for a full day and niiight."

The joking atmosphere of the pair was shadowed by the fact that their fight was no doubt uniquely dangerous. If Roswaal and Puck really went at it for real, as they implied, they'd have an apocalypse on their hands.

"Emilia-tan—what actually happened?"

"I heard they had to redraw maps after the fight was over…"

"Okay, *stop*! I'm putting a moratorium on the whole friends-play-mortal-enemies trope!"

"But Subaruuuu…" Puck whined.

"Don't you 'but Subaruuu' me! Stop altering topography with your fights! Apologize to Ino Tadataka at once!"

"I'm sorry, Mister Tadataka! There, that okay?"

As Puck apologized to Japan's first great mapmaker, Subaru racked his brain over the dilemma, which proved to be far more arduous than he had imagined. Ideally, Emilia would help out since she had more experience with the matter. However—

"When Puck and I lived in the forest, there just wasn't anybody around to bother, so I didn't think magicking season was that big a problem. But that naïveté got us in trouble…"

"And the past three days is the solution you came up with… I can sympathize with you wanting to handle the problem by yourself, Emilia-tan, but I want to say it's okay to ask others for help…especially me."

Subaru rather liked being needed by someone—especially if

that someone was Emilia. Followed by Rem, sometimes Ram…and Beatrice, Puck, and Roswaal at times, while we're at it. Then there are the villagers and the children. Okay, Subaru actually liked *lots* of people needing him.

For better or worse, he knew many people in this world now, and he wanted to cherish the bond that connected them.

"With the world on the brink of destruction, we embark on a quest to defeat Demon Lord Puck—that would just be too much work…so if we want a more peaceful, permanent solution…yes, that's our only choice…"

Emilia's eyes shot open. "Subaru—did you get some crazy idea again?"

"That's our Subaru," Rem nodded. "I am in awe."

"Don't get *too* excited, ladies!"

With a sheepish grin at Emilia and Rem, who had jumped the gun, Subaru walked over to the dining hall window, which was covered in a thick blanket of fog by then. He rubbed the window with his hand and looked at the mansion garden.

"Beako—am I correct in saying that the cold is confined to the mansion thanks to your barriers?"

"Yes, I suppose. The poor trees and flowerbeds would suffer if the cold escaped outside this building. So I've erected a moderate barrier around the mansion perimeter."

"You spared the garden, eh? That's honestly very touching. Now—about the barrier, can you still tweak the perimeter? If so, I've got a favor to ask."

"I could always try. But what do you want to do, I wonder?"

"Hmf-hmf-hmf! What else? I've got an idea that will make this magicking season funner, funnier, and fantastic-er than ever."

With one hand still on the window, Subaru snapped the fingers of his opposite hand and pointed to the ceiling. As everyone else's eyes widened at the spectacle, Roswaal alone smirked and winked. With Subaru reflecting in his golden eye, he said, "Well, I've no objection to a little fun. That necromancy you showed us the other day was immeeeensely interesting. So—what is it you have in mind for my mansion and the great spirit Puck?"

"In my hometown of Hokkaido—well, in a broad sense, and there should probably be an asterisk next to 'hometown'—anyway, we've got a festival. And I wanna use copious amounts of Puck's pent-up magic to have a little bit of fun."

In Subaru's brain was an image of a winter wonderland festival he had only seen on TV. A magnificent festival in a kingdom of white. Borrowing the name from his ancestors, the festival was called—

"I hereby call the first annual Chitty-Chitty—Roswaal Manor Snow Festival to order!"

As Subaru posed triumphantly, thumb pointed and teeth gleaming, everyone else in the room held their breaths.

"Chitty-Chitty Snow Festival…"

Emilia tilted her head in thought as she repeated the name of the festival. And her verdict—

"Are you sure we need the 'Chitty-Chitty' part?"

And so—letting that one part of the name go—the festival committee began to work out the details of the event.

5

And just like that, before anybody knew what was happening, the plan was quickly headed toward actual implementation—

"And now, the first annual Snow Festival has begun! Hey, gang, you wanna go to New York?!"

"Y-yeah…?"

As Subaru took on the role of MC, the group's responses were sparse. The momentum hung emptily in the air, but this was of little concern to Subaru as he beheld the silvery scene before him. And under his encouragement, the crowd at least seemed to be enjoying the festivities so far.

At present, Roswaal Manor's front garden has transformed into a winter wonderland. And in it was a crowd of people: more specifically, the citizens of Earlham Village. The off-season chill had brought their ice-season clothing out of storage, but the villagers looked noticeably giddy rather than discontented.

And that was because there wasn't a soul in existence that was not excited by the word *festival*.

"Wow, a snow festival… Your creativity never ceases to surprise me, Subaru," said Puck, emerging from the scarf wrapped around Subaru's neck. The architect of this winter wonderland thoughtfully stroked his chin fur as he gazed at the festival visitors.

"Hey, when it comes to wasting recourses, don't underestimate

the abilities of a modern man whose ancestors survived the famine. Since we can't hide from the cold anyway, we might as well turn it into a big party."

"Well, I never imagined this *could* become a party," Puck explained. "You complain about the cold, but you love the snow—humans are so hard to understand."

"Well, it's human nature to get excited over things like blizzards and typhoons, even if they are technically natural disasters."

"Hmm, hmm, fascinating." Puck hummed, craning his neck in confusion just the same.

A supernatural being such as himself likely had difficulty understanding, but humans were creatures who sometimes craved the unreasonable. They were wary of nature's savagery, yet at times, they could flip that fear into fun—truly paradoxical creatures.

"Subaru, you haven't finished your story yet!"

"Oopsie, so I haven't. Sorry about that!"

A villager summoned Subaru from his conversation with Puck. Incidentally, since Puck's presence was hidden from them, the conversation likely looked like a lengthy monologue to them. Even so, nobody spoke up about it—a testament to the villagers' deep understanding with Subaru.

"Okay, I was explaining the rules, wasn't I? In short, feast thine eyes on the mansion's front garden! Use the snow and ice here to create art pieces that showcase your creativity and craftsmanship—this art contest is this snow festival's main purpose! I've prepared a luxury prize for the winner, so I hope you'll all aim for the top!"

"Oooh!"

The words *luxury prize* caused a fervor among the participants. This festival was hosted by their dominion lord, Roswaal, so it was only natural that they would have high hopes for the prize.

"Okay, you have until the fire goes out! Lights, camera… action!"

"—?"

"Oh, right, that means *start*! Go, go, go!"

Though it got off to a rocky start, the snow festival began at Subaru's command. The villagers got to work in teams, but snow-sculpting required intense concentration and dexterity of the fingers. Subaru couldn't wait to see the collection of epic creations before him.

“Ahh, breathtaking,” Subaru marveled as he watched the villagers diligently work on their snow-sculpting and gave a satisfied leap off the snow platform.

It would take hours for the great works of art to be finished. During that time, Subaru headed toward the other pent-up-mana-expelling experiment that was set up. After all, they had so much ice and snow. He couldn’t let it end with a simple snow festival.

“So are things looking good on this end?” Subaru asked.

A young man in the village youth group turned to look at Subaru. He was cutting ice and had sweat on his brow. “Yes, Subaru, most prosperous indeed! Things are all good on our end.” He was surrounded by other young people, cutting ice and putting the chunks onto a platform in a similar manner.

“By the way, I hope you don’t feel like you got a raw deal cutting ice while everyone else plays in the snow,” Subaru apologized.

“Oh, not at all. We’re just happy to serve the village. And word has it this fire season is going to be hot, so we’re grateful to the marquis for suggesting this.”

The youth group leader, a man with a crew cut, smiled genuinely as he wiped the sweat off his brow. Nodding at him, Subaru heaved a silent sigh of relief that the proposal was happily accepted.

These young men, who were carving blocks of ice while the others played in the snow, had volunteered to cut ice to stock the ice houses for fire season. Whether to preserve food or simply to keep the heat out of the home, ice was an essential item to have when the weather was hot. In a world without any air conditioning, ice houses were quite important. Subaru had learned this in passing during his trips to the village.

“Yeah, but it’s still hard labor. I really ought to be helping you…”

“Oh, no, no, Subaru, you’ve already helped us more than enough. If we ask for any more of your help, it will surely be bad karma. Besides, you’ve given us quite a lot of entertainment already.”

“Really? Was there some performance I didn’t know about?” Subaru titled his head, unable to determine what the man was referencing. Then he followed the youth group leader’s gaze and found Ram and Rem restlessly running around the front garden.

They were both giving instructions as appointed members of the snow festival governing board, and their ice season uniforms were refreshingly cute.

"Just bearing witness to that is a deeply moving experience. Don't you agree, Subaru?"

"Yeah…you may be right. Well, if that's all the payment you need, then I'm glad we could help."

The other youths nodded deeply in agreement with their leader. If that truly was their consensus, then Subaru was happy for them. A firm handshake with their leader confirmed it.

Reassured by the spirit of the young men, Subaru returned to the snow festival. As you'd expect, Subaru didn't know all that much about snow, but after a while of making the rounds and offering a moderate bit of advice here and there—

"Ooh, it's Subaru!" "There's Subaru!" "Know him and fear him, *the White Terror*!"

"Good to see you guys aren't letting the cold dampen your spirits!"

Subaru was greeted by a group of kids bursting with energy and excited. With steam rising from their sweaty bodies, they ran in circles, screaming:

"Wa-ha-ha, snowww!" "Ja-ha-ha, snowww!" "Bwa-ha-ha, snowww!"

Over the snow, they skated, slid, and tumbled into the winter wonderland. As Subaru watched these snow minions, he couldn't laugh at them. They reminded him of his own childhood. He just nodded in deep understanding and said, "But in time, you will all realize—that the *snow* was playing in *you* all along…"

Spotting the shallowness behind Subaru's airs, a girl marched up to Subaru and said, "Ah, Subaruuu? You look bored. Come here! Look what I made out of snow!"

It was Petra, the beautiful girl whose future excited Subaru the most. In her hand was a little bunny made of snow.

"Ooh, a snow bunny! Didn't know that was a thing in your culture, too!"

"Hee-hee, isn't she cute? Did I do good?"

"Yeah, it's great! There, there, now, let's make her even more stunning. Check it out."

As Petra looked on in confusion, Subaru gathered some leaves and pebbles nearby. He attached them onto the bunny Petra made

until its ears and eyes had transformed before her very eyes. Petra's eyes lit up at the sight of it.

"Ooh, awesome! Subaru, you're so awesome! Now it's a bunny…It's a real bunny!"

"Heh-*heh*. I know, right? And seeing you so happy really gets my blood pumping! Okay, let's give her yet another power-up! Let's add a tail and wings, some missiles, mecha-fusion functions, and a cockpit and a caterpillar—"

"Whoa, slow down…"

Ignoring Petra's pleas, Subaru brutalized the snow bunny. Minutes later, all traces of its former self were gone, and the bunny had transformed into a killing machine: Multipurpose Special Aviation Assault Weapon YUKI USAGI.

And it need not be said that the purehearted girl's former joy was nowhere to be seen anymore.

"Hmm, *a woman's heart is fickle as autumn's sky*…guess the saying was right. Peh! Peh! Peh!"

Spitting out the snowball that had hit him square in the face, Subaru watched Petra grow smaller and smaller in the distance. The snow bunny that had tickled his boyish sensibilities was apparently not to her liking.

"Maybe Petra prefers realistic robots over super-robots," Subaru mused.

"Ummm, I get the feeling she doesn't like either," Emilia said.

"No, no, it's too soon to reach a verdict. Next time, I'll hit her with a realistic robot and see what she thinks."

After solidifying another snowball-facing by Petra in his future, Subaru began to make his rounds to observe the snow sculptures that were gradually coming to completion. Being everyone's first snow sculptures, many of them were crude, but each and every sculpture was a testament to everyone's cooperation. It wasn't easy to pick a winner.

"Isn't it a shame, though, that everyone went with realism? Maybe it's because they don't have the concept of mascot characters here, but there's lots of castles and animals…ooh! Now this one's really lifelike!"

"Oh, thank you very much, Subaru. I'm quite proud of my Urugarum!"

"It's so cold you thought I could take the heat?! What a sick joke!"

Only a few days ago, the mansion and village were plunged in an unprecedented crisis involving the Urugarum demon beasts…and this was a snow sculpture of one of them. The terror and stress now fresh in his memory, the goose bumps on Subaru's skin were from more than just the icy air.

"I commend your efforts because I love edgy stuff. But you weren't considerate enough of the emotional trauma of your judges. Therefore, I give it seven out of ten! I look forward to seeing your next creation!"

As Subaru appraised the snow Urugarum, the man who created it smiled cynically and said, "Tough crowd."

Observing the exchange, Puck tickled Subaru's neck with his tail.

"*Pfah*, what?"

"About the scoring system—who's overseeing it besides you?"

"Me, Rozchi, and the village chief is our secret judge. If all the judges are known, people will try to bribe us under the table. We firmly oppose such unscrupulous judging practices when it comes to an artistic competition."

"But would people really go to such lengths to get the prize?"

"Of course they would. It's a present from *me*, and there's only one of its kind in this world."

What the prize lacked in monetary value, it more than made up for in rarity. Upon learning that the grand prize would come from Subaru himself, Puck's mouth gaped in surprise. "Dang, Subaru, considering this isn't even your problem, you sure are generous."

"Well, the ones in trouble are Emilia—and you, right? So of course I'm gonna help."

It was of little hardship to Subaru, who was enjoying the festival. So there was no need to hesitate when it came to this easy level of helping out. In the final analysis, Subaru was much more in their debt than they were in his.

"Hmmm…from where I'm standing, Subaru, this quirk of yours is very…*you know*."

"No, I don't know, there was way too much innuendo. You'll have to be more specific…"

As Puck snickered, Subaru suddenly stopped in his tracks. Seeing this, the girl sculpting in his path happily clapped her hands.

"Ooh, Subaru! Come look at this! It's a sisterly sculpture by myself and my sister!"

“Rem and Big Sis…so you participated instead of helping out? I’m surprised.”

Her face aglow, Rem gestured to the work of art beside her. On the other side of the snow sculpture stood Ram, dressed in an additional layer. She crossed her arms and snorted at the sight of Subaru.

“Ah, Barusu. So nice of you to be lured into the light by our artistry.”

“I’m not quite sure how I feel about the moth-to-a-flame vibes of that sentence, but yeah, I came to see it. What happened to get you out to compete in this cold-as-balls festival, Ram? I thought you didn’t even want to help out.”

“Master Roswaal gave me permission to compete. Unless you’re suggesting that I should have stayed holed up in bed alone while Rem and everyone else had fun in the snow?”

“Needlessly aggressive, but you’re saying you hate being left out, right?”

As Subaru cringed over Ram’s passive-aggressiveness, Rem quietly stepped before her big sister. Then she clasped hands with her red-nosed sister and said, “No, Subaru, I begged Sister to join me. She said playing in the show was too childish for her, but I just had to play with her…”

“Don’t you feel ashamed, Big Sis, forcing your little sister to make excuses for you?”

“No, Rem’s tangible love gives me a sense of superiority. Feel free to be bitter.”

It’s hard to make a comeback when your opponent doubles down. So Subaru gave up on dismantling Ram’s sophistry and turned his attention back on the snow sculpture the twins had constructed. The entire sculpture was draped in a white cloth, and it was about as tall as the average person. Knowing how skilled Rem was with her hands, he imagined it would be quite the work of art.

“We’re very proud of this sculpture,” Ram said. “It is a culmination of our strengths, skills, and sisterly love.”

“That’s right. I combined my feeble abilities with Sister’s leadership, and this is the best we could have produced.”

“That’s a strange way of saying, *I did all the work while my big sister watched!* …Anyway, what’s your sculpture’s title?”

“It’s titled *The Amazing Subaroswaal*!”

“The name is already a red flag!”

Ignoring Subaru’s quip, Rem removed the cloth from the sculpture—to reveal a masterpiece of a lone man, sculpted with extreme care. It was finely detailed, each and every little part of him tidily refined. As a snow sculpture, it easily had the potential to eclipse all the other submissions. It had only one flaw—the subject of the sculpture was undefined.

“There was a clash of opinions—my sister wanted to sculpt Master Roswaal, and I wanted to sculpt you,” Rem explained.

“And after weighing the pros and cons, that’s what we settled on,” Ram clarified.

“It’s like an *anti*-compromise!”

As the sisters told Subaru the backstory of their sculpture, he struggled to come up with a score for it. It was beautiful that the sisters had produced it together, but the sculpture had turned out downright blasphemous.

The joint piece, *The Amazing Subaroswaal,* appeared to be a statue of Roswaal, with traces of Subaru mixed into it. It was an indefinable creation that maddened the mind of whoever saw it.

“Oooh, what’s this I seeee? What are you all doing out… Oh my, what is this…”

Roswaal, who had been making his rounds scoring the sculptures, came over to see what Subaru, Ram, and Rem were looking at. But when he beheld *Subaroswaal* in all its glory, Roswaal’s face did something it seldom did—it went rigid. His confident smile faded off his lips, and his eyes swam, desperate to find a comment he could give.

“Oh! Master Roswaal…so sorry you’ve caught us unprepared,” Ram said. “But please, take a good look.”

“Sister and I made this together. I know we’re family, but please give us your honest criticism.”

Seeing both judges in place, Ram and Rem eagerly awaited feedback. Ram wore her usual overly confident posture, but unless Roswaal was mistaken, even humble Rem seemed confident.

They both seemed to expect high marks for their snow sculpture. However—

“All right—sorry, but that’s a five.”

“Out of *five*…?” Ram prompted.

“Out of *ten*, idiot! Just callin’ it like I see it! After seeing that abomination, I pray for the marquis’s future reputation!”

“Don’t be so silly…!” Ram shot Roswaal an astonished look, but the latter merely shook his head and raised a hand. Only four fingers were raised. His score was even lower than Subaru’s.

Incidentally, each score was out of ten, and since there were three judges, the possible total was thirty points.

“It’s not *badly* made, you seeeee. But it just—how do I say this diplomatically—gives me the creeps.”

“But I *know* there was nothing wrong with our concept… I guess Barusu’s features ruined it.”

“Now that can’t be true!” Rem protested. “We fused what we each consider to be the ideal figure—no way could that not work out! I’m sure this sculpture is just ahead of its time.”

Upon hearing Roswaal’s curt review, Ram and Rem lashed out in protest. However, given the substance of their arguments, Subaru saw another indescribable sculpture in their future.

Subaru offered a good faith argument: “Maybe we’re the only people who think it’s weird because we were the subject—”

“Oh! Found you, Subaru! Beatrice and I submitted sculptures in secret. Would you like to look at our—*agh*! Wh-what is this? This snow sculpture looks *really* weird!”

“—Yeah, *nooo*. What an absurd idea,” Subaru pivoted.

When Emilia happened upon *The Amazing Subaroswaal*, she rejected it on the spot.

In other words, for the good of humanity, that sculpture will *forever* be ahead of its time.

Nevertheless, the first annual snow festival plodded along—and Petra was crowned the winner. The winning sculpture received twenty-eight points and was titled *Multipurpose Special Aviation Assault Weapon YUKI USAGI*.

Truly, it was a victory for a very cunning, very badass girl.

6

“All that hard work for nine points? I just think that’s *strange*…”

“Lia—maybe the assignment was just too difficult for you and Betty,” Puck consoled her. “How should I put this… It was hard to identify the artistic points in your snow sculptures.”

Emilia and Puck were in the front garden after the snow festival, and all the village attendees had gone home. Emilia’s

cheeks were puffed out in indignation as she stood by the snow sculpture of Puck she had made. Beside her was the snow sculpture of Puck Beatrice had made. They received scores of nine and seven, respectively, which was mostly explained by the many omitted details in their works.

It could be said that evaluating the avant-garde snow sculptures properly was beyond what humans were capable of.

"But Subaru really is a bottomless well of random knowledge, isn't he," Emilia said. "You could never have a snow festival near the Elior Forest."

"Yes, it only has appeal in an area that doesn't see much snow," Puck said. "If you live in a place where snow is a burden rather than a joy, you wouldn't even think to have a festival for it."

"Huh, is that why…? Yeah, you may be right."

Emilia nodded in understanding as she walked around the empty exhibit under the night sky. Thanks to Subaru's idea of using a snow festival to help Puck control his magicking season, Puck's Odo had reached stable levels. The bitter cold of the past few days would be completely gone by the morning.

"But when that happens, these snow sculptures will melt away. So many works of art… It *really* feels like a waste."

"Well, that's snow for you. It doesn't last forever. It is what it is."

Emilia noticed a catch in Puck's voice but didn't point it out. She just stopped mid-path among the snow statues and gazed at the twinkling stars. And in the icy-cold air, the stars hung, beholding the snow sculptures below.

"I really am sorry you and Betty and everybody else at the mansion didn't win," Puck said.

"Well, that girl's snow bunny was really good. Roswaal and the village head were downright smitten with it…and Subaru was surprisingly quiet. I wonder what that was all about."

"I'll just say *no comment*," Puck said. "But I really did want to learn more about the luxury prize."

"Me too. That thing from Subaru's hometown…what was it again? A *cornpota*? Was that its name?"

The grand prize for the snow festival was a mystery item Subaru had been holding onto for a while. It contained strange letters and pictures in rows and came in a bag with a peculiar texture—the contents were apparently edible, but it was a little

unsettling.

Incidentally, while this was happening, Petra was eating the exquisite corn potage–flavored snack and reveling in its deliciousness…but that's a story for another time.

"You know, I probably should have consulted Subaru first thing when the problem arose. I could have avoided so much worrying."

"True, true," Puck agreed. "But you shouldn't run to others at the first sign of any problem—that's not the kind of daughter I raised. Even if it feels beyond you, you need to try to figure it out on your own. Okay?"

"Yes, yes. I know."

Emilia giggled, and Puck stroked his chin with an "Atta girl." Then a faint silence flowed between them until Emilia suddenly broke it. "Hey—do you remember what Subaru said at the end of the snow festival?"

"If you have magicking season again next year, let's have another snow festival. Most people would be put off by the idea, but if anybody can turn magicking season into a raucous good time, he can."

"That quality of Subaru…I find it to be really…*you know*."

"Yup. I *do*."

If Subaru were present, he would have sulked at the pair's use of innuendo to leave him out of the conversation. It was a conversation that only people who had spent years together as a family could understand.

"Next year…" Emilia remarked thoughtfully. "That's too far in the future for me to even imagine what my life might be like."

"I hope everything turns out the way you want, Lia—regardless of whether or not Subaru can really have his way."

"Puck…are you against having a snow festival?"

"Not at all. I had a good time, and I think you did too. But…I'm not sure that when next year rolls around, Subaru will still be happy to be by your side, Lia."

Emilia held her breath as Puck's words sank into her. Her position weighed heavily upon her. She didn't have the liberty of making decisions lightly. Even the environment she lived in might be drastically different one year from then.

And the idea of trapping that kindhearted boy in the vortex with her made Emilia feel incredibly guilty.

"The wound on his belly and the bite wound from the demon

beast—every wound inflicted on him is the result of your actions, Lia. I know you wouldn't be the sort to forget that, but you *must always keep this in mind*."

"—I know."

Though Puck spoke in a lighthearted voice, his words were anything but light to Emilia. She nodded solemnly, and Puck washed his face in silence. Then, looking at the snow sculptures near Emilia, he said, "But I do hope we can have a snow festival again next year."

"_____"

"Because it would mean I pent up enough mana to have a magicking season, and only Subaru would run a snow festival."

In other words, a snow festival the following year would mean Emilia made it safely through the year, and Subaru Natsuki was still living at Roswaal Manor.

"Yes…yes, you're right—I hope we have a snow festival next year, too."

Puck's unexpected sentiment made Emilia nod and smile. Puck stroked his chin in satisfaction with his beloved daughter's smile—an ominous fear smoldering secretly in his heart all the while.

Would there be a snow festival next year? And would he be able to keep the provisions required for it for the next year? Emilia's safety, Subaru's safety—as well as Puck's own safety and several other factors—

Over the past few months, several significant transformations had taken shape. How much influence would these changes have in the near future—

"Puck—is something wrong?"

Emilia tilted her head anxiously at Puck's solemn facade. His ears immediately perked to console her as he said, "Hmm? Oh, I'm fine. Just wondering if we're going back to our normal warm weather tomorrow."

"Oh, you know, that's a good question. Subaru and Ram might even complain about it again."

Oblivious to Puck's worries, Emilia turned her concerns to the coming morrow as if it were an ordinary day. And as Puck observed his sincere, beloved daughter's diligence, his tail quietly danced in the air.

___And he let his worries of what might happen before the next

snow festival remain unspoken.

ALCOHOL PANIC

1

The mansion of Marquis Roswaal L Mathers contained many areas that were not utilized. The mansion was located near the mountains, away from the capital. Sitting on a vast plot of land that could rival a small castle, it comprised three buildings.

The dining hall, parlor, and wash area were the most utilized sections of the main building. The east wing contained the personal chambers of the master of the house, his servants, and guests. The west wing contained mostly multipurpose rooms.

Among these rooms, servant use of the rooms in the west wing was significantly lower than the other buildings. The word *multipurpose* had a pleasant ring, but it would be more correct to say that they were areas whose purpose was way too loosely defined.

There was a dance hall that never hosted parties, a storage room that contained non-displayed paintings and other works of art, and a library that contained books unworthy of Beatrice's Archive of Forbidden Books—an overabundance of unutilized areas.

Because of this, even though they were cleaned on a rotation, the west wing was a building that was completely forgotten. The only part of the west wing that was frequently accessed was the storage room in the hallway connected to the main building, so its desolation was easy to see.

"I'm just saying, it really feels futile coming here every three days to clean—how do you feel, Big Sis?"

Subaru removed his uniform jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves. He posed the question with a duster in hand. Subaru winced as he wiped the floating dust away with his hand. The flying dust always mercilessly respawned, no matter how carefully he cleaned it. What an infuriating foe.

"Seriously, where does dust even come from? What do you think, Big Sis?"

Ram sighed. “Stop asking stupid questions and get back to work. No matter what Master Roswaal asks of us, we go above and beyond to fulfill his wishes—that is our job.”

“Yeah, yeah, aye-aye, my lady. Okay, let’s get back to wor—hey, *dude*!”

The very lady who had epically kicked him in the butt was now on the receiving end of Subaru’s condemnation. Upon closer glance, the snippy Ram was daintily seated on a wooden box in the corner of the room. Naturally, there was neither a mop nor a rag in her hand, which was pressed to her mouth in a yawn—

“So *this* is why you weren’t griping at me every five seconds! C’mon, the two of us together are like half a person, you know? No way can we finish this task on time as a quarter person!”

“A person no longer ashamed by his own worthlessness is a person no more… You’re useless, Barusu.”

“Maybe take a look in the mirror?! Look objectively and ask yourself which one of us is the useless one—me or you?”

“Nobody uses this storage room. It won’t make a difference if we go lax on the cleaning.”

“What happened to ‘going above and beyond’ to fulfill Master Roswaal’s wishes?!”

But Ram only sighed apathetically in reply to Subaru’s self-righteous clapback. All the chores at Roswaal Manor were performed equally by a three-person team of Subaru, Ram, and her twin sister Rem. However, about eighty percent of the mansion’s functionality could be attributed to Rem and the remaining twenty percent was handled by Subaru and Ram—and the mere act of finishing those tasks was a daily struggle.

As a result, the team of half-competent cleaners was assigned the task of dusting and tidying the unused storage room in the west wing—assignments that were understandably motivation-crushing.

In actual fact, only ten minutes into their cleaning, Ram’s and Subaru’s motivation was completely dead.

As a rule, Roswaal Manor’s three wings were cleaned one by one on a three-day rotation. Since they had cleaned the west wing only three days prior, the lack of filth only drove their motivation to even lower depths.

“But there was a kernel of truth in what you said, Ram. Here I am, dusting, but I feel like I’m just spreading the dust around and accomplishing nothi—*hi—achoo*!”

Subaru sneezed at the dust while Ram sat on the wooden box, ditching her duties. All the accumulated dust rose into the air, and the tip of the duster sailed into the side of the shelf, upsetting its contents. With a groan, Subaru crouched to pick up the collection of mysterious knickknacks off the floor.

"I'm just cleaning up my own messes at this point. Work is just a negative cycle—oh?"

While reaching for his fallen duster, Subaru noticed a difficult-to-see, unnatural join in the floor. He ran his hand along the floor just to make sure and noticed that it was indeed a wooden cover for underfloor storage.

"Ram, there seems to be a trapdoor in this floor—do you know what's under here?"

"I don't know…just cut it out, Barusu. A bunch of moths will probably fly out if you open it. If you do open it, make sure that I've left the room and locked the door first."

"Why would I need to lock the door? And that ship's sailed, by the way."

Subaru had already found the trapdoor handle, yanked on it, and removed it in one clean motion. What Ram said had given him an ominous feeling, but his curiosity had gotten the better of him.

In an instant, Ram had jumped off the wooden box and made a beeline for the door to the room. Smirking at her quick escape, Subaru mustered his wits and took a cautious look beneath the floor —

"Woo?"

And his mouth and eyes rounded in surprise.

2

"So anyway, behold—the treasure I found beneath the trapdoor!"

With a formal bow, Subaru reverently set a wooden box atop the desk before him. In the pursuit of the storage room cleaning—which had promptly been forgotten—he had unearthed an unexpected treasure.

Subaru's grand announcement was directed at Roswaal, who was seated at the desk in his study. Despite his eccentric way of presenting himself, by day, the master of the house was busy with administrative work.

But when Subaru rudely barged into his study, he was not upset

—on the contrary, he was full of amused smiles.

"Ooooh, how *very* interesting. Yes, I do recall hearing quite long ago about a secret stash of spirits somewhere in the villa. Under the floor of the west wing…so that's where it was hiding."

The wooden box on the desk was filled with wood chips. Beneath were some very expensive-looking liquor bottles. The trapdoor Subaru found in the storage room revealed a secret room filled with a large supply of liquor—one might call it a wine cellar.

But it wasn't the word *spirits* that had caught Subaru's ear. It was the *villa* that made Subaru crane his neck in curiosity.

"Hm? Did you just say 'villa'? But we found this liquor beneath *this* mansion."

"Ah yes, I can explain. I am merely using this mansion as a headquarters for Emilia's preparations for the royal selection—my true home is elsewhere. The primary Mathers residence is muuuuch farther east. Then again, wherever I reside *is* the Mathers residence, so the distinction is negligible."

"A mansion this big is your *second* home? Then your main home must be—nope, never mind. I'm too scared to find out. Anyway, since you seemed clueless about it, I guess that liquor stash isn't really to the taste of the master of the house?"

"Well, though I *am* the current master of the house, this was my father's and grandfather's house before me. I *suspect* that the underground liquor stash was a little prank by my grandfather or grandmother. I heard they were heeeeavy drinkers."

As Roswaal's purple lips turned upward into a soft smile, Subaru lowered his eyebrows in suspicion. Why was everything about his grandparents hearsay?

Noticing Subaru's skepticism, Roswaal winked and said, "My family members have generally not been blessed with long lives, so I've never met my grandfather personally. And I haven't spent muuuuch time with my father and mother, either."

"Ack, sorry, I didn't want to pry…but I guess that sort of thing happens."

It was easy for Subaru to forget all the work he had to do, but this was another world. The average lifespan in Subaru's world was probably quite different. And the long-living species and the existence of magic weren't exactly things that could be easily compared to modern science.

"So—I just brought this box as a sample, but what do you want

to do with the rest of your grandfather's collection? There's still a lot buried under this house."

"Hum. That's a good question. We could just keep it beneath the floor, and I could have you reinforce the trapdoor, but that seems such a waste—by the way, Subaru, how do you feel about alcohol? Can you hold your liquor? Or does the mere smell of it make you turn red in the face and mumble *I don't want to go home alone tonight…*? Which one aaaare you?"

"So the infamous question people get asked at mixers exists in this world, too…" Subaru's brow wrinkled as he answered the marquis's question. "Well, I haven't actually drunk that much before. You can't drink until age twenty where I'm from."

"Age twenty? Well, well, how very *patient* your people must be."

Subaru was not actually being dishonest. In his world, he was still underage, so he had no real reason to reach for a bottle of booze. (Also, for the record, he never once attended a mixer.)

Subaru Natsuki lived his days utterly devoid of booze, blunts, and babes.

"Oh dear, oh dear, what a surprise. From your personality, I just assumed you would absolutely snatch at a luxury item with eager bravado."

"I kinda see what you built me up to be in your mind, but sorry, that's not even slightly me—well, not exactly. I did grab a puff of my dad's cigarette once when he wasn't looking. But…"

"But?"

"The moment I got it in my mouth, my dad came back and gave me a good thrashing. Then, to make it worse, my mom told me in a spurt of misplaced tough love that I'd stunted my growth…Anyway, cigarettes and the like are very triggering for me."

If he had bad friends, Subaru might have had a bigger connection to alcohol and cigarettes, but luckily, he didn't have bad friends—or good friends, either. So the opportunity did not arise.

"A guy can't stray off the straight and narrow if he can't even find it to begin with…heh. What a joke," Subaru muttered to himself.

"Sorry to interrupt your little moment, but I suppose this liquor wouldn't suffice to reward you?"

"Yeah, I guess not. I actually did drink once—this big old guy coaxed me to drink some, and I thought my throat, stomach, and

head would burn off. That's about it."

Since Roswaal seemed eager to gift Subaru the alcohol, he pointed at the box and said, "Is it legal for a guy my age to drink around here? As I said earlier, I'm less than twenty, so I'm underage. I can't even access NSFW sites without a guardian's consent."

"I don't *quite* understand what you just said, but I get the sense that's something you shouldn't look at even *with* a guardian's consent…Anyway, back to the liquor—the drinking age in Lugunica is fifteen, so you're cool."

"Ooh, you're catching on…"

After successfully using a word he'd picked up from Subaru in a sentence, Roswaal continued, "There's kingdom law, of course, but each fiefdom has its own laws set by their rulers. In other words, the law of this land is made by none other than meeee."

"Yikes, talk about a dictatorship. So as long as I'm living here, I can legally drink—wait, I'm over fifteen, so I can drink legally by kingdom law anyway, huh."

Even though he was protected by law, Subaru still wasn't too pleased about receiving a gift of liquor. This was only natural, as he have the taste or appreciation for it. But it would be rude to turn down the liquor as an expensive item and a reward from Roswaal.

"Maybe I could tie it with a ribbon and display it in the corner of my room? Then, when I turn twenty, I can pop open a bottle and revel in my first steps into the future."

"That's a long-winded plan. You already have plenty of opportunities to drink—after a bath, after work, in between meals… If you ask meeee, it's nothing worth savoring."

"Um, it's kinda wack to force somebody to drink if he doesn't want to. Unless you want a lawsuit on your hands, I'd advise against it. Besides, aren't you being a bit hypocritical? You don't drink much."

"I used to drink like most people, but I have cut down quite a bit over the past few years. Though I do have a drink when there's a party, I still try to drink in moooooderation."

Roswaal shrugged. His posture implied he wasn't much of a drinker, but he exuded the overpowering aura of a boozehound. Subaru didn't even wish to imagine what he might be like drunk.

"But I am kinda curious to see if I can hold my liquor…"

Drinking was never something that interested Subaru. It wasn't

until alcohol came up in conversation that he suddenly was curious about his tolerance. It was a similar sensation to caring about the results of your grip test in PE class.

And then his curiosity migrated to Emilia and the others—how high was their alcohol tolerance?

But without an occasion to drink, there really wasn't any way of testing—

"That's it—a party! Rozchi, you said that you drink at parties, right?"

"Hum? Well, yessss. I did say that. I'll joyfully overindulge when it's a special occasion until I'm tipsy. I am only human."

"I thought so! Nobody can complain about a little drinking if it's a joyous occasion."

Roswaal chuckled seductively. "My *goodness*—why do you want to get me drunk, my boy?"

"Eew, *no*. It's not *you* I'm after, Rozchi, got it?!"

Subaru clapped his hands together after leaping in to shut down the coy-eyed Roswaal. The look on his face was sinister—rather, the look in his *eye* was sinister, but it was not the look of a sinister man overall.

However, that was the face Subaru made when he was about to propose something out of the blue. Upon seeing that look, Roswaal's odd eyes filled with excitement.

Subaru wasn't sure he would live up to Roswaal's expectations, but he proudly declared that his proposal was the same.

"If I plan a party for us, I can bring the liquor up from the cellar, right?"

"Aha—well, it was a secret stash anyway. So I might as well let you figure out how to use it up. But I must hand it to you…"

"Hand what to me?"

"Using a party as a pretense to see Lady Emilia and Rem at their most vulnerable…that's quite the amorous scheme you've concocted there, eh, Subaru?"

"That wasn't my intention, but now you're making it seem like it was, so please stop?!"

"Now, now, *now*, I don't hate the idea."

"It's not what you think!"

And while not his original intention, the bud of an ulterior motive took root in Subaru's heart as he began to plan the party.

3

As soon as Subaru entered the room, he said out of nowhere, “And so I have planned a flower-viewing party for us all—I hope to see you all there!”

“Flower-viewing?” Emilia craned her neck, repeating the unfamiliar turn of phrase. Her silver hair was in a ponytail that day, and she was wearing a long skirt. Her finger was pressed to her sakura-colored lips, but she didn’t seem all too started by the sudden proposal.

Since she had grown accustomed to Subaru’s sudden declarations, this was her default posture when receiving them.

“I’ve never heard of anyone doing anything like that before, but it sounds like fun. Flower-viewing… Ooh, flower-viewing…”

“Yup. It’s basically what it sounds like. Where I’m from, as soon as ice season ends, these trees called sakura bloom like crazy with pink blossoms. When they boom, we have picnics under the trees, drinking, eating, and singing… That’s a flower-viewing party!”

“Huh? But it sounds like you don’t get a very good view of the blossoms that way…”

“Yeah, that’s the dark irony of flower-viewing that people don’t like to talk about. Anyway, it’s basically an excuse to party.”

Smiling sheepishly over Emilia’s takedown of the flower-viewing tradition, Subaru proceeded to sum up his proposal. And the gist of his proposal was that everyone in the mansion take the secret liquor Subaru had been gifted to have a flower-viewing together—it was a roundabout way of asking them to a picnic usually focused on drinking in the park.

For Subaru, he was less interested in drinking and more interested in seeing everyone else’s reactions. Especially Emilia—she might suddenly become very sexy when drunk. And if that happened, well, her already dangerous charms would only get stronger.

“You bring a picnic of food and drinks and have a good time beneath a bower of beautiful blossoms. That is the main aim of our flower-viewing! It has nothing to do with watching Emilia get drunk and go crazy, I promise, okay?”

Then Emilia frowned. “Aha—now I get it. Goodness, Subaru, you’re a naughty boy.”

“Huh?! What?! My evil plot exposed so soon?! Inconceivable!”

“Children mustn’t drink alcohol,” Emilia explained. “It stunts their growth.”

“Wait, you said the same thing as my mom?! Also, hey, I’m not under the kingdom’s legal drinking age! I’m turning eighteen this year! And I’ve got Roswaal’s permission, too! I’m a grown-up, I swear!”

“I don’t think a grown-up would make such a big fuss like that. But, huh, I didn’t know you were eighteen. I’m *really* surprised… I thought you were much younger.”

Emilia smiled sheepishly as Subaru made a fuss over the little nugget of caution she had heard from somewhere. But she had added that jab about his age only because Subaru’s face lacked the calm composure expected of someone his age.

“Well, I have heard foreigners think Japanese people look young for their age. By the way, how old do I look to you?”

“Twelve…no, thirteen. About thirteen years old!”

“But that’s younger than Felt! Also, thirteen isn’t that much older than twelve!”

Rather, it wasn’t that much older than the children of Earlham Village. He would love to turn the tables and ask those children how old they thought Emilia looked, but then this conversation would reach a perpetual gridlock.

“Arrrgh, I need a nap. And hey, you keep saying I’m like a child, but what about *you*, Emilia-tan? Can you hold your liquor? Are you the type who can drink the whole wine list in one sitting?”

“Sorry, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

While Roswaal had the image of a heavy drinker, Emilia’s tolerance was beyond Subaru’s imagination. She might drink like a fish, and it was equally likely that she was an epic lightweight.

As Subaru squinted his eyes and assessed the possibilities, Emilia gave an awkward cough and said, “For all my posturing, I’ve actually never had alcohol before. Oh, but I am of legal drinking age. I’m not thirteen.”

“I don’t doubt you—and if you were thirteen, that’d make me a criminal, besides.”

“Why would you be a criminal, Subaru?”

“Because you’re so cute that you make me want to do something naughty, Emilia-tan…”

“So anyway, Puck told me I must never drink alcohol.”

“You’re just gonna *ignore* my answer?!”

Subaru was stunned by Emilia's clever new ignoring technique, but Emilia showed no reaction. Instead, the pendant on her neck shined, and a third voice butted into the conversation.

"Of *course* you can't drink—alcohol is the preferred drink of bad adults. And you'll always be my sweet baby girl, Lia, so there's no need for you to even touch such a vile drink."

Along with the overprotective monologue emerged a swarm of light orbs taking the shape of a tiny cat. The summoned cat spirit sat on Emilia's shoulder, poked her cheek with his paw, and said, "I won't let you drag my baby girl down a dark path. Any party drinks that find their way near my Lia, *I'm* gulping them all down *myself*. I won't let Lia have any! Shoo! Shoo!"

"Oh, so you'll come to the party *and* drink, I see."

As Puck conducted a spirited shadowboxing match and declared himself Emilia's protector, it looked like he was just excited to drink himself. So it was a relief to Subaru—at least they would come to the flower-viewing.

"Emilia-tan, if Puck's coming, you're coming, too, right?"

"Huh? Yeah, I'm all right with that. I have a feeling Puck won't let me drink, but I would love to eat good food under some blossoms. But is everyone else on board with it?"

"I planned the party with Roswaal to begin with, so he's cool. And if Rozchi's coming, Ram will too. We'll have to ask Rem to cook the food and stuff, so I'll ask her as sincerely as possible and get her to agree. I'll help with the food, too."

Subaru, who struggled with vegetable peeling in the beginning, had recently become quite the useful kitchen assistant, thanks to the hand dexterity he always had. To someone like Ram, whose growth was stunted from years of steamed sweet potatoes, his aspirations were on another level. (Also, the keenness of his instructor had something to do with it.)

"Oh, that Rem, she *really* enjoys cooking with you, Subaru. I know! Can I help with the cooking, too? I know you've doubted my culinary abilities in the past, Subaru."

"Right, I did used to doubt you—well…that doubt still hasn't cleared, actually."

"Grrr! You're so obstinate. Weren't my rice balls just fine?"

"In flavor, yes. But you struggled a bit in the aesthetic department."

The lunch Emilia gave to Subaru to take with him into the

mountains contained simple rice balls. But shape aside, they were abnormally large in size. When a rice ball was as big as a child's head, it took everything he had just to eat it.

It wasn't an issue of flavor, but of balance. That was Subaru's evaluation of Emilia's culinary skills.

"Well, pooh! You don't have to tell me twice. Just wait. My flower-viewing food will knock your socks off. And it'll be too late to apologize to me then!"

As Emilia puffed herself up in anger, Subaru's mouth slipped into an open smirk. While he had his concerns over Emilia wanting to get back at him, he still couldn't help but be excited about it.

"Okay, so when are we having this little get-together?"

"Strike while the iron is hot! —Then again, we won't be ready for it today. But we have to do it soon before the weather cools down. I was thinking we'd talk it over with the others and maybe do it the day after tomorrow."

He wanted to schedule the picnic around Roswaal, since he had the fullest plate of anybody in the mansion. Any night when he wasn't away from the mansion would be the day of the flower-viewing.

"If our main objective is to look at flowers, maybe the flower fields in the forest would be our best bet? Ideally, sakura would be awesome, but wrong season, wrong world," Subaru mused.

Puck smiled. "Drinking alcohol while admiring lots of flowers… hmm, how idyllic." Then his tail shot up and he interjected, "Oh, except if we're going to look at the forest flowers, we might have a problem."

"What problem is that?"

The tiny cat washed his face, lowered his voice, and explained, "If we leave the mansion, Betty won't be able to join in the fun. She can't leave the mansion. It's her duty."

"Whoa, really? I don't really get it, but isn't it okay for her to slip out just for a bit? After all, the master of the house is also attending."

"I understand what you're trying to say, Subaru, but Betty doesn't stay in the Archive of Forbidden Books because Roswaal commanded her to or anything. She just can't leave the mansion."

Puck's oddly assertive insistence confused Subaru into silence. Subaru wasn't quite sure how to define his relationship with the Archive shut-in. But leaving her out just didn't sit right with him.

He knew he was not mistaken.

This was proud, hard-hearted Beatrice. If she found out that everyone else went on a picnic without her, she would carry that grudge with her until the end of time.

"Argh, why is Beako such a pain in the ass! But wait a minute… didn't she come all the way to the village to heal my wound once? How did she do that?"

"That was a special exception. I asked her to do it, and I was sure surprised when she said yes."

Perhaps Beatrice's conscience was moved because it was an emergency. Regardless, a life-and-death situation and a fun picnic couldn't be more different from each other in scope. Unable to come up with any other ideas, Subaru fell silent.

Emilia sadly looked down and said, "If Beatrice can't go, then I guess the flower-viewing party is canceled…right?"

Seeing the lonely shadows her long eyelashes cast on her cheeks, Subaru's heart burst into flames. Now he *had* to do something.

"Okay—I've got an idea!"

Subaru clapped his hands loudly, signaling he had come up with a way to bring their picnic plans back from the dead.

And seeing his spirited bounce-back, Emilia's amethyst eyes glittered with hope.

4

One thing led to another, and in a flash, it was two days later and time for the party.

After receiving Emilia's blessing, the party preparations proceeded at a rapid pace. Be that as it may, this was mostly due to Rem's epic heroism in carrying out all of Subaru's suggestions.

"I can't embarrass Subaru," Rem explained. "So I'm giving it my best."

And with a cute smile, she zipped around cutting fish and meat so quickly it was invisible to the naked eye—Rem's "best" was uniquely powerful.

Despite the sudden increase in workload, Rem helped without a frown. Thanks to that, the party preparations progressed without any problem. Subaru and Emilia helped get the venue ready, but to preserve their reputations, they would not discuss the efficacy of

their efforts.

In any case, the party was now close at hand. Subaru let Rem and Emilia handle the rest of the venue decorating while he went where he would carry out a task only he could.

And as for that place in question—

"Anyway, everything's ready. You just need to join us, and everyone will be there."

"I ask myself this every time…but *why* do you come in here, I wonder."

With his explosive intuition, Subaru could take himself to the Archive of Forbidden Books at will. While a part of him was pompously proud about it, he felt his power was a little lacking at times—but he set those feelings aside for the day.

Beatrice sat atop her stepladder as usual. With an unrestrained slap on her shoulder, Subaru said, "C'mon, get with the program. Today's the day we're all having a flower-viewing party. If I told you about it in advance, I know you'd just grumble at me, so I made the party a surprise just for you!"

"The second half of that statement is a refutation of the first! I don't know what this flower-viewing business is, but why must *I* attend such a frivolous—"

"See, I knew you'd say that, so I put two arguments into one. Besides, we both know that for all your moaning, you'll come to the party anyway—so just embrace the inevitable."

"Could you *please* get that you-annoy-me-but-I-understand-you look off your face?! You infuriate me! *Infuriate* me! How could you *possibly* understand how I feel, I wonder?! For a start, you…"

Swatting away Subaru as he tried to drag her off, Beatrice jumped down from her stepladder. Then she glared up at Subaru with light blue eyes and said, "*Flower-viewing* or no flower-viewing, I *cannot* leave this mansion. You all just go have fun on your own, I suppose. I'm not going any—"

"I can't let that happen. Have a party and leave you behind to sulk? I'd feel so bad about it that I wouldn't be able to enjoy myself. So become a party victim for our sake. I won't take no for an answer."

"Wh-who gave you the authority to say that, I wonder?!"

"Lalalala—I caaaaan't heeear you."

As Beatrice screeched in his face, Subaru covered his ears and ignored her. This only made Beatrice's face grow redder, but Subaru

held his ground with the hotheaded girl and said, “I know some complicated circumstances prevent you from leaving the mansion—Puck told me. That’s why I planned this party with those circumstances in mind. And everything is already ready. All you need to do now is let me kidnap you.”

“_____”

“Real talk? I do understand how you feel. I know what it’s like to look forward to some event, then turn into a whiny little flake just before it’s time to go. But when I kick myself in the ass and leave the house, I always manage to enjoy myself—that’s the truth. Your ass just needs that first kick, and I’m here to give it to you.”

Beatrice scowled in silence. But her defeated sigh and slumped posture was her answer. With a little chuckle, Subaru clapped her on the shoulder and took her out of the Archive of Forbidden Books.

Then they slipped through the halls of the mansion until they arrived—

“All right, come on in! You and I are the final guests to arrive.”

“For crying out loud, what *hare-brained scheme is this*? I wonder…”

Giving the apathetic Beatrice a push, Subaru opened the door. Then, as he watched the suspicious girl’s eyes fill with surprise out of the corner of his eye, a satisfied smile spread on his face.

“And so we have gathered here today for a party to deepen our friendship under the stars… Welcome to the first annual Roswaal Manor Stargazing Party!”

Subaru danced in front of the stunned Beatrice, spread his arms wide, and bombastically announced the party’s commencement. They were in the highest floor of the west wing of Roswaal Manor—the dance hall whose original purpose was long-forgotten.

The newly decorated dance hall already had a spirited dancer—a gust of wind blowing in from the open balcony. There was a buffet lining the corner of the overly spacious room, but since there weren’t many party guests, the portions were small. What they lacked in size, however, was more than made up for in quality and appearance.

“Ah—Subaru’s here. And he’s brought Beatrice with him!”

Noticing their arrival, Emilia raised her voice to greet them. Hearing her voice, Rem trotted eagerly over to them.

“Good evening, Subaru. I knew it was best that we leave Lady

Beatrice in your care. That's why you're the best Lady Beatrice handler in the mansion."

"Awww, you're making me blush. Though I guess as a top-tier Beako artisan, this is the least I could do."

"I don't recall having a 'handler' or an 'artisan'! Humiliating, I suppose!"

Beatrice raged at the cheerful pair, but Subaru and Rem peacefully brushed it off. This only made Beatrice shake with anger—until a tiny presence danced onto her shoulder from above. The furball directly beside her face made Beatrice's eyes light up with cheer.

"Puckie!"

"Hey, Betty, welcome to the party. I was worried you might be too proud to show up…but leave it to Subaru to know which Betty buttons to push."

"D-don't say such ridiculous things! You *always* come first to me. Yes—that's right. I *know* it! No lies, I suppose."

"Ha-ha-ha, glad to hear it. I really hope that's true."

For some reason, Beatrice's cheeks stiffened for just a second from Puck's peaceful response. But Subaru heard none of this because he was busy hearing Rem explain the party setup to him.

"The food preparation and service is already finished—Emilia, my sister, and I did that. And since you helped with the prep work, it actually took much less time than usual."

"Oh, cool. But I still piled more last-minute tasks on you, like decorating, didn't I? I really feel bad about that. I swear I'll make it up to you some time."

"Oh, that's all right. I'll just reward myself by watching you sleep longer than usual tonight."

"Hm…? Did you just say something? I thought I heard something weird."

"No, no, I said nothing weird at all."

Though Subaru had the feeling he'd missed something important, Rem's cute smile steered her clear of further scrutiny. Scratching his face, Subaru discarded his puzzlement and headed for the balcony to be a good party host.

"Good evening, Subaru. I see you managed to bring Beatrice along. Good boy."

Emilia smiled and patted Subaru's head when he came out to join her on the dark, breezy balcony. Subaru closed his eyes,

smiling from the tingly sensation of her white fingers tickling his scalp.

"Mmm, a part of me wants to let you baby me like this, but another part of me wants to assert my manliness and induce an awareness that we're man and woman—it's a tricky dilemma."

"Huh? But I already know you're a young man, and I'm a woman."

"See, it's that pesky 'young' part I'd like to get rid of…"

"Barusu."

As Subaru surrendered to the control of his heart's innermost desires, Ram glared sharply at him from her spot at the corner of the balcony beside Roswaal. He smiled sheepishly as he clearly read the words in her gaze: *Just get on with it.*

"Here you go, Subaru."

"Ooh, thanks."

Rem, carrying a silver tray, swooped in to rescue him with impeccable timing. Atop the tray were glasses of liquor. He took a glass and looked around at the others. Emilia, Rem, Roswaal, and Ram each held a glass. And Beatrice, the scowl still plastered on her face, held a glass of juice beside Puck.

"Okay, umm—thank you all for attending this party under the moon and stars at Roswaal Manor tonight. We're holding this soiree in the interest of building solidarity and deepening friendships among the residents here. First, I would like to give you a speech that will serve as a vital accompaniment to this party. The three most important things you need to keep an eye on—"

"Um, Subaru, just a hunch, but is this speech *really* long?"

"Nah, nah, I was just gonna say always watch out for your stomach, your wallet, your mom, and your temper—wait a minute, that's *four* things! It's a bit. Get it?"

"Barusu."

Under Ram's even sharper glare, Subaru sheepishly surrendered the role of MC to the party's host—in other words, Roswaal, the master of the house.

With a smirk on his face from the preceding banter, he lightly raised his glass and said, "I could give a verbose speech, but that would only put a damper on things, so I have only one thing to say—to everyone gathered here, regardless of your circumstances, we are all connected. We may face our fair share of problems in the future, but we shall work together to overcome them. So for

tonight, we toast to the stars watching over us from above."

As Roswaal's deceptively normal speech hung in the air, everyone raised their glasses and said in one voice, "Cheers!"

With the light clinking of glasses, the little drinking party signaled a quaint beginning beneath the stars.

5

And that was how the Stargazing Party began, light and cheerful.

In name, the soiree was to celebrate friendship and solidarity, but none of the specific activities fulfilled much celebratory purpose. If forced to describe it, Subaru would say this was a celebration for victory over the demon beasts and the recovery of those wounded in the crisis.

The dishes lined up in a row on the table were more extravagant than usual. Naturally, it wasn't the case that Rem slacked off on her cooking otherwise, but tonight's fare held a special flavor.

Licking their lips over every dish, the party guests looked up at the stars and enjoyed some light drinking. The drinking party beneath the flowering cherry blossoms never came to fruition, but the panoramic view of the night sky from the balcony provided a glittering display that held its own against any cherry trees.

The air was crisp, and the sky was clear, not a cloud in sight. The perfect conditions for a night of stargazing had converged—it was the ideal situation for a starry drink. Being named after the Pleiades star cluster himself, Subaru was excited to share the surprising wealth of astral trivia he held.

However—

"*Hmmm*? What's wrong, Shubaru? You sheem sho…ahaha, you look *really* weird. And there's sho *many* of you too—no fair. All the Shubarus are gonna hog *all* the desherts to *themshelves*."

"I *look weird*? That hurts—and there's only one of me! Argh, Emilia-tan, you're hopeless. Look at how much you've spilled…"

Emilia leaned coquettishly against Subaru, her face bright red with a cheerful smile. As Subaru tried to placate her, she pouted and downed the rest of her glass's contents in one swig. The amber liquid slipped through her sakura-colored lips, gurgling softly in her throat as a hot sigh escaped her mouth.

"Mmyum…liquor's yummy. Why'd you all keep thish a shecret

from me? Tha's *mean*. You all *shneaked* behind my back…shneaked? Yeah, you *shneaked*—ee-hee-hee!"

"Oh god, why are you so damn cute!"

Emilia had slumped onto the balcony floor, topping off her own glass with more liquor. She already had a row of empty bottles beside her, showing that her alcohol tolerance was rather high.

(Though it could also be argued that while she hadn't passed out yet, she still got drunk impressively quick.)

"I can't say this isn't how I imagined things would unfold or how you would act, but you're more than just a lightweight—you're a bad drunk, Emilia-tan."

From all their interactions thus far, Subaru had concluded that Emilia would either hold her liquor very well or not very well at all, and the verdict was crystal clear: She was a lightweight. A lightweight might strip, barf, or bother people—thankfully, it hadn't escalated to that yet, and she remained a cute drunk.

(Though it could also be argued that the fact that she wouldn't stop drinking if people offered made her fairly bothersome already.)

"If I had my way, I'd force her to stop drinking and sing her to sleep with some lullabies…"

But Subaru had circumstances preventing him from stopping Emilia—her sexily draping herself over him, for one. For another, he very simply could not move from his spot.

And as for why—

"Oh, *Subaruuu*?"

"Yes, Rem? May I help you, ma'am?"

"Glomp."

"Sorry, ma'am, but you're hurting me."

As Subaru sat cross-legged on the balcony floor, Rem was lying beside him, using his knee as a pillow. Though she wore her usual emotionless expression, the redness of her complexion alone was enough to raise concerns.

And as for Rem, her movements were few and sluggish. The devil of alcohol hadn't influenced her too badly, aside from an impulsive chomp on Subaru's thigh when she remembered the existence of it.

Though, it was questionable whether all of this was the fault of alcohol. While Rem was definitely intoxicated, unlike Emilia, she hadn't had a sip of alcohol.

"Assuming you didn't get drunk off excitement, you must've

gotten drunk off the *smell* of alcohol, of all things. But if that's the case, what happens when you use wine in cooking? And you also pour wine for Rozchi sometimes."

For that matter, she was the one who had distributed the glasses of liquor at the start of the party. When pressed with all of Subaru's questions, Rem lifted just her head slightly off Subaru's knee and said, "Don' make *fun* a me Subaru…Subaru…Subaru…"

"You're calling my name three times… Um, why is that?"

"My work's *impornant*, so I al'ays stay vigilan'. Bu' today, I'm leddin' m'self *loose* 'cos issa *party*."

Her expression was clear, but her speech was not only strange but illogical. She then cut herself off mid-thought, flung her arms around Subaru's waist, and pushed her head into his stomach. It was a fierce display of clinginess, but she, too, was clearly completely drunk. Subaru was stunned by the unexpected occurrence, but he indulged Rem with some head pats. Rem purred happily in turn.

"Are you a cat?! You're supposed to be an Oni…" Subaru then craned his neck in sudden confusion. "For that matter, Oni are supposed to hold their liquor well. But I guess that bit of lore is different in other worlds."

Then Ram's voice answered from behind him. "I don't know what you're comparing us to, but members of the Oni tribe do hold their liquor well compared to other species. I often participated in drinking contests at parties with adults when I was a child."

"Gee, thanks for confessing to your underage drinking, Ram. I don't mean to impose my views on Oni cultural norms, *but*…your complexion and speech sure haven't gotten *questionable*."

"But of course. My tolerance is in a league of its own."

Subaru turned his head to see Ram sitting in a chair, elegantly pouring herself a glass of liquor. Though she wore a maid's uniform, the abundant grace of her gestures was the epitome of aristocracy. Her abnormally sturdy self-confidence and infernally dignified presence were what gave that impression.

And this aristocratic Ram frowned at the sight of Rem with her arms around Subaru's waist and said, "Rem seems to be enjoying her liquor. How truly adorable."

"I wouldn't say 'enjoying'… Well, she *looks* like she's enjoying the evening more than anything, but the only thing Rem is drunk on at the moment is *vibes*. She hasn't had a sip of liquor and look at

her. Did Rem ever get like this at parties in your village?"

"My sister and I…we were in a complicated position. Besides, I wanted to keep Rem away from adult parties."

When Ram averted her eyes, Subaru hesitated to ask a follow-up question. Only the other day had he heard what had happened to their horns. Talk of the twins' hometown was probably taboo.

Subaru hoped that he had thoughtlessly brought up the subject because the alcohol had dulled his sense of judgement.

But as a matter of fact, though it was difficult for the others to tell, Subaru had also drunk quite a lot of liquor that evening.

He had hoped that with a little alcohol in their systems, Emilia and Rem would blossom into newer, more alluring versions of themselves—but tragically, it turned out that Subaru held his liquor well. And he could still read the room, due to his inability to get drunk. He was utterly exasperated by his own genetic predisposition.

"Turns out not all alcohol tastes bad after all… But the only things I gained from this evening is *that*, and the lesson that you should never carelessly offer a girl a drink."

"I feel like that's only true in extreme cases," Ram said, tipping her glass to her lips. It was astonishing just how many empty bottles were strewn about her. Her Oni nature was on full display, not in supernatural powers, but in behavior and constitution.

"So Ram is a heavy drinker, just like I thought." Subaru's eyes turned to the party hall. "So what about the others—dang, check out Puck."

Subaru's eyes shot open when he saw Puck on the table. All his posturing of not letting Emilia have a drop of liquor long forgotten, he was now enjoying a soak in a bowl filled with liquor. Roswaal sat across from him, chatting spiritedly with a wine cup in hand, showing a glimpse of the surprisingly good relationship between the spirit and the chief mage of the royal court.

And then, after his eyes scanned the room for a certain small silhouette—

"Ah! Beako, you little rascal."

He found Beatrice seated on the deserted railing of the balcony, her sausage curls swaying in the breeze. Seeing the pensive, lonely look on the side of her face, Subaru sighed to himself and said, "Welp, guess I'll go tease her a little. Emilia-tan, sorry, but take care of Rem for me."

"Hmmm? Mm-hm, okay. C'mon, Rem, come to meeee! Mm-hm-hm, you're *really* cuuuute!"

Subaru carefully untangled himself from the glazed-eyed Rem's embrace and leaned her against Emilia. When Rem didn't struggle and leaned freely into Emilia's arms, the half-elf gleefully cuddled her close, gently caressing her blue hair, and nuzzling her cheek against Rem's.

"I wanna take a picture so bad…" Subaru whined with painful

reluctance.

"I'll burn the image into my eyelids," Ram said, nodding reassuringly.

Entrusting the image to Ram's memory, Subaru headed to the balcony railing where Beatrice sat all alone, quietly looking up at the stars. Subaru sat beside her on the railing, smiled at her, and said, "Don't be a wallflower. It kills me seeing you all alone like this."

"Gratuitous slander, I suppose. And I didn't ask for your sympathy, thank you very much. Besides…wasn't it you who insisted I not have a drop of liquor? What else am I supposed to do, then?"

"I know it's unfair for me to say this since I invited you, but come *on*, the way you look, it's just *visually* wrong to see you drinking. And I don't even *wanna* picture the poor little girl, secretly developing a taste for alcohol and day-drinking by herself in the Archive of Forbidden Books."

The objective of this party was to have a good time. Turning a little girl delinquent would run very counter to that. For that matter, this seemed like one of those instances where Puck really should step up to stop her.

"And yet that damn cat is soaking in a sumptuous alcohol bath —make it make sense."

"*Don't* badmouth my brother. Besides, his behavior only proves how much he trusts his Betty, I suppose. So I am most certainly *not* lonely—"

"Whoa, Emilia and Rem are cuddling more fiercely than ever!"

"Did you come all the way over here just to ignore me? *Beyond* insulting, I suppose!"

"Ahhh—no, no, it's not what you think! It's just, Emilia and Rem are being, like, every man's fantasy right now and it's not like they've stolen my heart or anything but dammit I wish I had a camera…!"

"That wasn't even slightly convincing!"

On the opposite balcony, Emilia was cuddling and caressing Rem, while Rem purred and nuzzled against Emilia in turn. It was beyond wholesome—it was downright *yuri*-licious.

"I'm so mad I can't be there right now…!"

"Oh, enough already. With my brother in Roswaal's clutches, it's best that I sit alone in the night breeze. It suits me, I suppose."

“Hey, I said I’m sorry, okay? It hurts a party host when his sulking guest snipes at him. Oh, fine, if I must, I must.”

With a smirk at the pouting Beatrice, Subaru took a leaf from her book and jumped off the railing. But the moment his feet hit the floor, the alcohol in his system made him almost fall to the ground below.

“Waaah?! Oh—oh crap! I almost became a squashed tomato there!”

“Not even your cheap attempt at physical comedy will get me to smile, I suppose. Even if you were smooshed to death like an insect, I doubt it would be all that entertaining.”

“I’m not risking my life for your amusement—I don’t feel *that* guilty! Shit…I totally almost died there.”

Wiping the cold sweat off his brow, Subaru plopped himself down beside the exasperated Beatrice. She didn’t welcome his presence, but she showed no inclination of leaving, either. So Subaru assumed that meant his presence wasn’t minded.

“Okay, since you’re bored, let me tell you a wonderful story. Truth be told, I was hoping to use the starry sky as a pretense to share a romantic moment with Emilia-tan, but the unparalleled power of alcohol thwarted that plan.”

“All I’m hearing is a schemer drowning in his own scheme, I suppose.”

“And you’re not wrong—you’re *not wrong*, but still! ……Let’s put a pin in that for later. Anyway, I’m gonna tell you a story about the stars from my hometown. Over there, each star has its own name and legend.”

In Subaru’s fantasy, his rousing conversation about stars would whet Beatrice’s curiosity and bring a smile to her face. But despite his enthusiasm, when he looked up at the stars—he held his breath.

This was nothing new to Subaru, but every time he looked at the stars, he couldn’t help but feel a fleeting hesitation.

And with good reason—the stars in this sky were completely unrecognizable.

The brightest Polaris, the Big Dipper beside it, the Summer and Winter Triangle asterisms, Orion’s Belt, Cassiopeia—where did they all go?

Ironically, one look at the night sky and it was instantly obvious. The stars in this world were in completely different places from the stars in Subaru’s world.

“You’ve forgotten your story, I suppose… If you’ve quite finished, then be off with you.”

“I haven’t forgotten anything, dude. There were just too many stars to name, I had a hard time deciding… Okay, first, take that star. That overly bright star, that’s Polaris, the North Star. If you ever lose your way, use it to guide you. It always points north.”

“But that’s south—the complete opposite direction.”

“Okay then, it’s the *South* Star.”

“So arbitrary! Are you making this all up, I wonder?!”

In actual fact, he was making it all up, but Subaru hid his shame behind an audacious smile and continued his story. In this sort of scenario, whoever yielded ground first lost. Not that he knew what this competition even was—alcohol was probably to blame for that.

Subaru faced Beatrice’s displeased gaze head-on, pointed at the South Star, and said, “You use the South Star as a starting point to find the other stars. Lower your gaze a little and look—see those five stars in the shape of an M? That’s Cassiopeia.”

“I don’t know what an *em* is, and I can’t see any shape besides.”

“You don’t see it, you *feel* it. Agh—okay, since you don’t know the letter M, think of it as a canyon. So the legend about Cassiopeia is, well, Cassiopeia was proud of her daughter Andromeda—so proud, in fact, that everyone else frowned upon her.”

“…For stories about stars, they certainly reek of *human*,” Beatrice grumbled, punctuating the word with a loud sigh.

But this sentiment made Subaru’s cheeks soften into a smile. “I know, right? Where I’m from, the stars are thought of as deities. But our deities are always up to some trouble somewhere—just like humans! And that’s what makes the stories interesting.”

“Bold of you to call stars *deities*. For beings beyond human comprehension, that’s a very self-serving interpretation, I suppose.”

“Okay, the idea of supernatural beings can be a bit chilling at times, but meanwhile, we’ve got a spirit over there who mostly fits that description, and he’s chilling in a bath of booze—your argument is invalid.”

As Subaru gestured with his eyes, Roswaal filled Puck’s empty bath cup with more liquor. Feeling any sort of reverence over such whimsy was absolutely impossible.

Beholding the same scene, even Beatrice got an uncomfortable look on her face as she said, “In a way, Puckie breaks the mold

when it comes to great spirits. So don't use his magnificence as a standard for all spirits. My brother is *very* special."

"Thanks for the cringey comeback. Anyway, as for the other stars…yeah, that's a good one, okay! Now we're going to look for our favorite: *Subaru*!"

"……Heh?"

As Subaru snapped his fingers and let his white teeth shine, Beatrice assumed she was witnessing an ego crucifixion. Picking up on this, Subaru frantically shook his head.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, don't pity me! It's not what you think! Yeah, Subaru is my name, but I was named after stars to begin with —*the Pleiades*. Anyway, the Pleiades are a cluster of several stars—I was saying we should look for it."

"Imagine naming your son after a twinkling star in the sky—your parents were truly cruel to you, I suppose."

"Can you *not* make a backhanded insult about me not living up to my name?!"

It's not that Subaru *wasn't* sensitive about it. Half-lying to himself about his insecurity, Subaru grandly pointed to the sky and said loudly, "You probably don't care, but stay with me here. Humor a drunk man's ramblings."

And as Subaru bounced back, Beatrice murmured quietly, "I never said…that I didn't care."

Subaru's eyes widened in shock as the little girl quietly averted her gaze. Her cheeks were slightly pink.

"What's this? What's this? Dang, talk about your emotionally constipated loli. Hey, you! Fine, fine, you forced my hand! Okay then, let's have a super-fun chat about the stars some more!"

"You're too loud, I suppose. You insufferable buffoon."

"Yes, yes, aren't you so cute!"

Thoroughly cheered up by Beatrice's attitude shift, Subaru merrily jumped back into his lecture. Looking up at the unfamiliar night sky, he mercilessly vomited out misguided legends about stars.

And as he talked, he felt a fluffy lightness in his heart and in his head all at once.

6

"Roswaal—"

“Oh *myyy*, oh my, had enough of your little tryst with Subaru?” Roswaal swirled his wine glass and asked Beatrice with a smile as she returned from the balcony.

Beatrice scrunched her face in disdain at the clown-faced man’s choice of words. “*Could* you limit your joking to your appearance, I wonder? Do you *really* think I could sincerely enjoy myself in that buffoon’s presence? Not even worth a laugh.”

“Oh, now, *somebody* sure needs to put her pride on the shelf. You’re always like this, aren’t you.”

“Of course. Nobody else in this group comes even close to my brother in experience, I suppose. But never mind that—”

Beatrice’s gaze shifted to Ram, who was sitting opposite Roswaal. Catching the meaning behind her gaze, Roswaal nodded discreetly at Ram, who quietly rose and left her seat. She gulped down the rest of her drink as she stood, then with a bow, she retired to the balcony.

Out on the balcony, Subaru, Emilia, and Rem were already fast asleep in a cuddle puddle. Ram draped a blanket over each of them one by one: Emilia’s with care, Rem’s with love, and Subaru’s with smothering intent.

“Kids who can’t hold their liquor sure are cute, aren’t theyyyy? Subaru may have put on a brave face, but I *do* believe he passed his tolerance.”

“It’s like a thread snapping, I suppose. His footing and manner of speech were jumbled from the start…but he’s always a clown. It’s no wonder I didn’t notice something was different.”

“For all your scorn, you certainly did offer him some support—as if you knew he would collapse. So I can only assume you *did* notice the difference…am I wrong?”

“_____”

“Now, now, don’t give me the evil eye. It was merely an innocent joooke.”

Beatrice heaved a long, tired sigh at the unsubtle teasing in Roswaal’s tone. It was a heavy, weak sigh that reflected their long years of association.

And at this action that did not reflect her youthful appearance, Roswaal shrugged his shoulders and said, “So am I to understand that this evening was *not* to your liking?”

“Did you think it *would* be to my liking, I wonder? This drunken *debauchery*… Betty *detests* disturbances of the peace. As such, this

party was the most loathsome thing I had the *displeasure* of experiencing."

"Was it, though? Based on your recent behavior, I have a hard time swallowing that. Haven't you merely resigned yourself to the solitary silence that you call peace, while in actuality, you—"

"Roswaal." Beatrice nipped Roswaal's serious voice and gaze in the bud. An uncomfortable silence flowed between the two. But it was then that—

"Betty."

"Puckie…"

The third presence left in the area, Puck, craned his neck from its position on the edge of his wine cup bathtub.

"Betty…did you not enjoy the party tonight?" he asked.

"No…that's not what I was saying. I was more than content, just watching you enjoy yourself. But you reek of alcohol right now, so I'm not going to hug you, I suppose."

"Meooow."

Sloshing droplets of alcohol from his glass, Puck sank into the drink. He then gulped the rest of the cup's contents in one breath then flew out, shaking the mist of alcohol from his entire body.

"How's that?"

"Still stinky."

"Then how about *this*?"

Puck's fur quivered as he rolled himself into a glowing ball of light. Then, in the blink of an eye, the cat's body reformed back to its pre-drinking luster.

"Must be *handy*, having a constitution that prevents hangovers…" Roswaal remarked.

With a wink at Roswaal's concise thought, Puck climbed onto Beatrice's shoulder and said, "Yeah, but in exchange, I don't get the satisfaction of a full belly of yummy food or drink. In a way, having a spirit's body is inconducive to having fun."

Beatrice softly nuzzled her cheek against Puck's, which no longer reeked of alcohol. Then she glared at Roswaal.

"*Ooh*, the evil eye. What *has* come over you, my dear?"

"I just want to hear your true feelings, I suppose. *What* was the point in tonight's debauchery?"

"It's *exactly* what I said before I made my opening toast. The people of this house need to come together to meet the challenges that we'll face in the future. Each and every guest tonight was here

by my most earnest wishes."

"_____"

"You must prepare yourself mentally, my dear. The time of fulfillment for the long, looong covenant is nigh. At the very least, that is the mindset *I* have right now."

His words colored with solemnity, Roswaal tipped his wine glass toward the balcony. And through the swirling amber liquid, Roswaal's heterochromatic eyes beheld the sleeping boy and girls.

Upon hearing Roswaal's earnest wish, Beatrice neither affirmed nor denied his resolution. She abdicated making a choice right then, but that was because it was a choice that Beatrice had been pondering for a very long time.

"No matter what else happens…I do hope for the fruition of your existence, Beatrice. I know I'm a hodgepodge of lies, but this is one of my few honest sentiments."

"A *trivial* sentiment, I suppose. Do you expect me to take that as sympathy?"

"No—as *empathy*. You and I are the only ones in this entire world who are party to our little conspiracy."

And with that, Roswaal set a new glass onto the table. Pouring amber liquid into it, the clown set the glass in front of the little girl.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Your share. It's downright cruel, coming to a party and not letting a single drop of liquor pass your lips. Those who would disparage your drinking are deep in dreamland, you see."

With a smile and a wink, Roswaal scooted the drink closer to Beatrice. She reached for the glass—but just before she could touch it, a gust of wind blew. The breeze, thick with the night air from the balcony, tickled an earlier conversation in the back of Beatrice's mind.

After a moment's pause, she pushed the glass away, rejecting the drink. "I'll decline, I suppose."

"Being faithful to Subaru, are we? You are just full of surprises tonight…"

"Do not mistake me. I'm not abstaining from drinking because of anything that snot-nosed brat said… It's because of something my mother told me long ago."

Beatrice's answer forced Roswaal to silence. Smiling coolly over the instant effect of her words, Beatrice patted Puck's back.

She experienced a night like this one in the past—under the

night sky, Beatrice's mother frowned at the sight of her daughter drinking alcohol. And she got the sense there was another voice urging her to stop, too.

That was why the shut-in of the Archive of Forbidden Books could not break the command her mother gave her that night.

"That's all, nothing more—whatever *he* has to say does *not* concern me, I suppose."

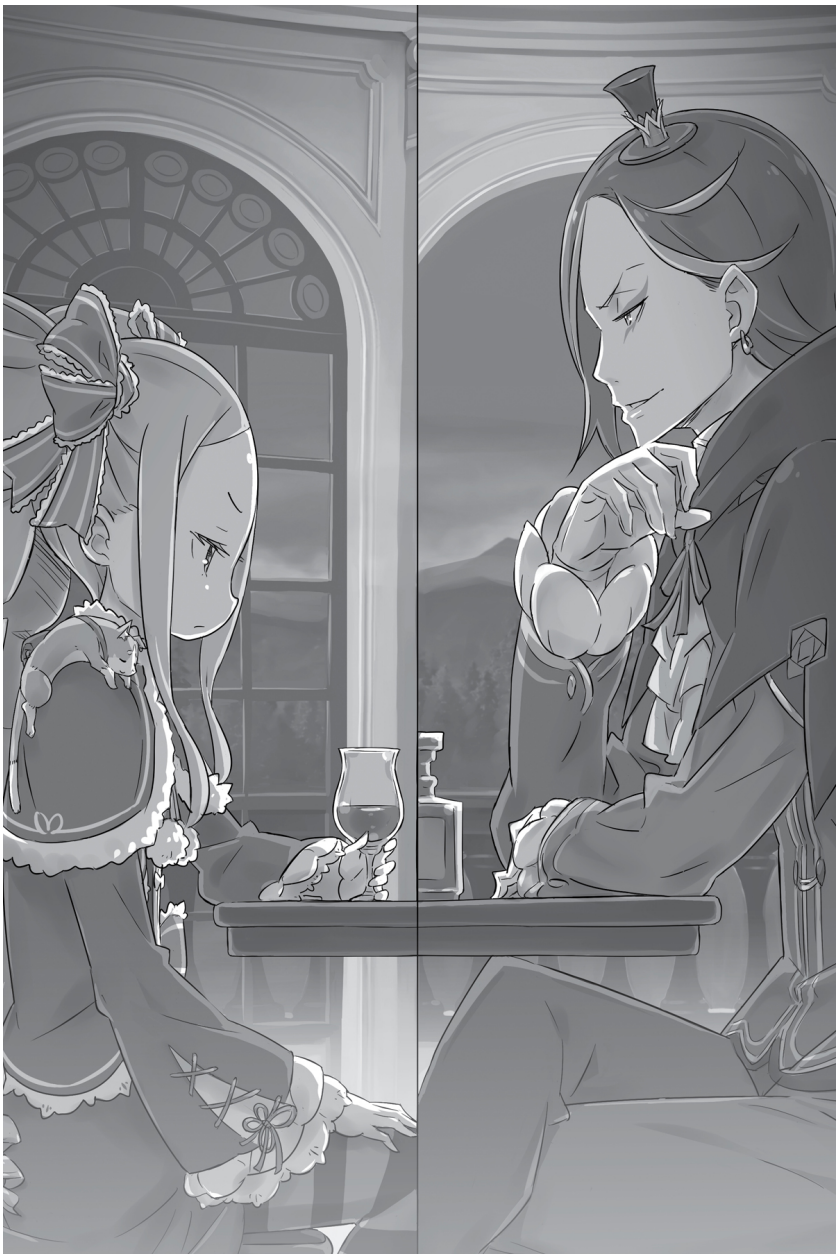
And with that excuse hanging in the air, Beatrice did not once touch the wine glass to her lips.

Night fell on the party.

Its host learned both the joy and strife in alcohol's flavor, and the girls had thoroughly explored the limits of their own alcohol tolerance.

And night slowly fell on them.

Only the stars quietly watched over this little moment of peace.



AFTERWORD

Well, hello there! This is everyone's favorite mouse-colored cat speaking! Or as most people know me, Tappei Nagatsuki!

There. I reversed the order of my names this time for kicks. They're both my name. Though despite my long years of signing autographs, I still struggle writing the kanji for *mouse*!

We have another short-story collection! Actually, I've been serializing monthly *Re:ZERO* short stories in the magazine *Monthly Comic Alive*, and this volume is purely a compilation of them.

Thanks to all of you, we're two years into publishing these short-story compilations, and this time, we had the easy task of compiling stories that had already been published! To be honest, I kinda felt like I got off too easy.

But actually, when it came time to look over the short stories for publication, I thought to myself…dang, my writing two years ago sure was immature. What a hack! This could use some serious improvement! Major bummer.

In the end, I wound up revising the entire collection of stories for this volume, and it was not at all easy! Womp, womp.

But in exchange, the prose was polished and the stories were unmistakably improved, so I hope you all enjoy reading about those peaceful days at Roswaal Manor.

Speaking of Roswaal Manor, Volume 3 of part two of the manga will be released the same month as this volume of short stories! In part two, the story really picks up as it heads for the climax. Do feast thine eyes on the powerful images!

Also, an anthology comic containing *Re:ZERO* stories from many different manga artists will come out in the same month! It's

also chock-full of cozy and fun stories! I do hope you'll add this anthology to enrich your *Re:ZERO* world experience!

Okay, now that I've finished talking about the heavy stuff, it's time to give thanks.

To Editor I, for anticipating how busy I would be publishing books while the series became an anime: Only you could have the foresight to gather my short stories into novels ahead of time for me. Regrettably, I was so hyper-focused on revising my writing that I'm sure the job was much more difficult for you than it needed to be!

To my illustrator, Otsuka: This time, we had a whole volume of peaceful, wholesome scenes for you to draw! To my amazement, not a single enemy emerged! A shocking truth after twelve volumes! But thanks to that, we got treated to your drawings of all the cute characters. Thank you so much!

We also have MF Bunko editor J, manga illustrators Daichi Matsuse and Makoto Fugetsu, designer Kusano, PR, sales, and everyone else who helped with this series in any way: Thank you all so much for your help.

And lastly, I would like to give my ultimate thanks to all of my wonderful readers for reading all the way to this part!

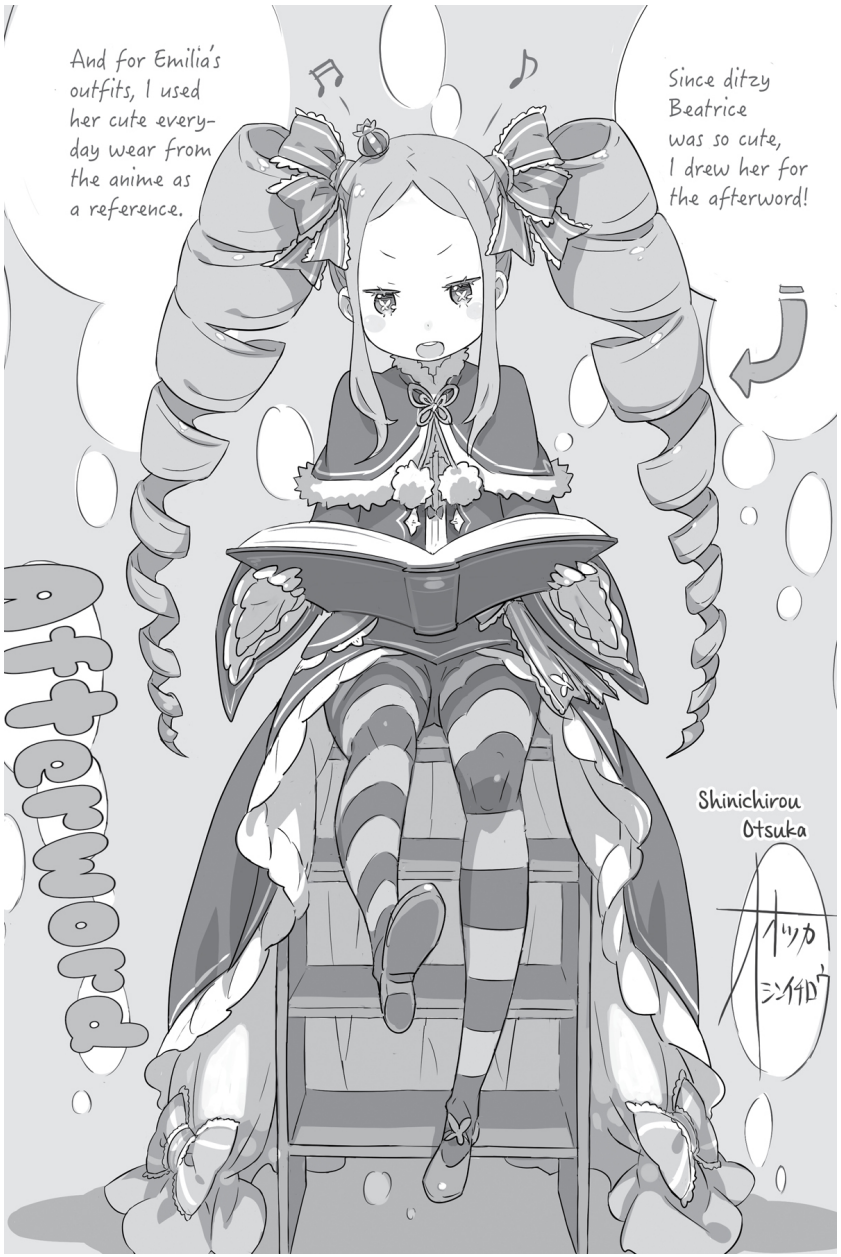
I hope you'll all continue to support the *Re:ZERO* light novels, manga, and anime in the years to come!

I'll see you all again in the next volume, I hope!

May 2016

Tappei Nagatsuki

<<Sleep-deprived, staying up to watch the late-night anime broadcast>>


And for Emilia's outfits, I used her cute everyday wear from the anime as a reference.
Since ditzy Beatrice was so cute, I drew her for the afterword!
Afterword
Shinichirou Otsuka

Subaru
Rem

“Subaru, Subaru, listen to this. My sister washed the dishes today without breaking a single plate.”

“Okay, that was a really random way to start a conversation… Sorry to be that guy, but we have limited space in this announcement corner, so we don’t exactly have time to waste on pointless stories.”

“Yes, quite right. But I just don’t have much to announce this time around…”

“For real?! C’mon, that can’t be true. I mean, the *Re:ZERO* anime is doing really well right now!”

“Indeed it is. And Volumes 2 and 3 of the manga are getting into the climax of the story. The light novels, the manga, and the anime are all getting quite exciting.”

“And by the time this book comes out, the anime will probably have its DVD release, and there’ll be bonus novels and stories not included in the main series—like, there’s gotta be hella stuff to talk about! C’mon, get with the program!”

“Bonus novels…! I missed that. Good on you for noticing, Subaru. Is there anything else worth noting?”

“Anything else worth noting? Um, let’s see…well, Volume 9 of the main light novel series comes out in September! After Volume 8’s ridiculous ending, we finally get to see what happens next! I guess that’s it?”

“After defeating the White Whale, Subaru returns to the mansion to rescue Lady Emilia and my sister. Working together with his allies, he successfully evades the Archbishop of Sloth… Ooh, how terrifying.”

“Don’t worry, Rem. I’m sure I’ll somehow manage to put all your worries and fears to bed.”

“Yes, I believe in you. Now I think we executed this announcement perfectly. That’s my Subaru!”

“What?! I don’t exactly get the feeling that was a smooth transition…”

“As I expected, you didn’t notice how I played you in the palm of my hand…how cute.”

“Uh, that’s not exactly a compliment—and it’s an admission of guilt besides! You’ve turned into quite the schemer, Rem!”

“Oh, stop…don’t call me clever *and* pretty. It’s embarrassing.”

“Well, you are pretty, but I never said that!”

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